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## Abstract

Queer women of color (QWOC) organizing in resistance to the increasingly hostile contemporary political context of the United States of America are at immediate risk for threats to survival. Nevertheless, some maintain romantic relationships that fall outside of the hegemonic frameworks of romance. While simultaneously resisting a settler colonial state that sanctions violence, environmental racism, and homophobia, QWOC are cultivating love in the face of oppressions they seek to dismantle daily. I used a Black Feminist grounded theory framework to explore the experiences of QWOC in romantic relationships who were also organizing in the contemporary radical political movements – an experience I termed “Revolutionships”. Using a Black Feminist grounded theory framework, I interviewed six dynamic QWOC activist couples and unearthed four main components of “revolutionships”. Each of these components, including unique strengths and challenges these couples face, will be explored. Additionally, the clinical approach for couples therapy with QWOC I developed through conducting the six interviews, the P.O.W.E.R. model, will also be detailed. This study developed a grounded theory approach for couples therapy with QWOC couples, highlighting the impacts of political activism on couple relationships, and contributes to the dearth of literature on QWOC.

*Keywords:* Black; Latinx; Indigenous; Asian; Multiracial; Trans; Bisexual; Lesbian; Political Activism; BlackLivesMatter; NoDAPL; Flint; UndocuQUEER

Revolutionships:  
Experiences of Queer Women of Color Maintaining Romantic Relationships while Engaging in  
Contemporary Movements for Liberation

By  
Montiniquë McEachern

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Marriage and Family Therapy

Syracuse University  
May 2020

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## Chapter 1:

### Introduction

Prior to November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, I was intensely fascinated with how queer women of color (QWOC) formed romantic relationships using social media. In 2013 I started a blog for QWOC and have received several messages over the years from people thanking me for creating the space, because they met their significant other on my page. With every thank you message, I grew more curious about how this was happening. I have been hopelessly single for the most part since starting my blog. Being a full-time doctoral student and therapist leaves little time for me to socialize and date, so social platforms took the place of chance meetings at coffee shops. The popular dating apps such as Tinder, OK Cupid, and Her have provided little relief for my singleness. I logged on and sadly found them overwhelmingly populated with profiles of white women. I began to feel like the only single Black lesbian in my community. I grew curious about how other QWOC were navigating cyber dating and creating meaningful romantic relationships using social media. I wanted to know how technology was helping QWOC navigate the waters in the shallow dating pools we inhabit, hoping to uncover a way to find connection myself. This question seemed to pull together all of my interests – blogging, social media, couples therapy, and creating community. I was animated by this question, then November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016 happened.

It feels bizarre to think of my research interest in a pre-Trump presidency – post-Trump presidency dichotomy, but the election of an openly racist accused rapist to the highest political office in the country really did change my perspective on what felt important. The week after the election, none of my transgender clients showed up to the clinic for their appointments. The only

Black couple I was meeting with at the time too canceled. I know that our personal identities are political and impacted by our society, but never before in my lifetime had a shift in the political climate of the country made me and those close to me feel directly in fear of what our futures would look like. My dissertation project had to be something that I could pull myself out of bed and face the world to work on for at least the next year. Swiping left and right on dating apps just lost that fire for me after the election. I grew less interested in how technology was impacting formation of relationships for queer women of color and instead wondered how we were all surviving the state of the country.

During this time, I turned to my grassroots organizing community in Syracuse, because this community has always been affirming of all of my identities. Although the anti-social justice policies and platforms of the presidency collapsed me into dejectedness at times, I was surrounded by folks<sup>1</sup> who were always showing up to resist Trump's regime locally and federally. At the center of this resistance was QWOC couples. They were showing up, despite their lives being impacted by the executive orders handed down from the presidency. I wanted to know how they were doing it: maintaining relationships while fighting for liberation. In my curiosity of how my friends were able to maintain relationships, I was reminded by way of my favorite feminist authors that radical queer women in the struggle was not new. There is a legacy of QWOC activist couples, from 1960's Civil Rights era feminist couples such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Joseph to my friends doing work today. Their love was making the work possible and inspiring me. How they were doing this became my burning question, re-instilling hope in

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word "folks" for a few reasons. One, it is a word I grew up with, a word that reminds me of the warmth and safety of my community. Another reason is that it is gender neutral, yet not seen as formal – such as "people" for example. Lastly, it is the word my friends that I have made in political spaces use to describe "us" versus "them". In this way, it feels like a word for the people, by the people.

grassroots organizing I had lost as a result of the election and giving me joy. I realized – after searching unsuccessfully for others in family therapy who may have explored queer women of color (QWOC) activist couples – that this was the question that would get me out of bed. This was the question I wanted to explore for my dissertation study.

In reorienting myself to a new research question, I too reoriented myself to the ways in which I was thinking about myself in relation to my research. This new question was so much of me, birthed out of my interactions with my community and friends. How could I conduct a research study within a community that I identified with and not be extractive or do harm to myself or my community? My audience changed as well; I was no longer speaking solely to couple and family therapists, but also to QWOC organizers. I wanted to author a narrative of love in the midst of oppression. Tuck and Yang (2014) critiqued ways in which researchers remain unseen and legitimized through researching pain and problems, speaking for subalterns – read as oppressed and marginalized people. Reading this critique of research, I am choosing to make myself seen in my work – not only by researching a community I am a part of, but also by researching resilience and hope. The academic process of conducting research is not immune to colonial practices. It is saturated with ideologies about how to know things, who can know, and distance between researcher and researched. It has at its core the assumption that research is meant for the sole purpose of going into a given condition, observing, and reporting out the observation. The process of reporting out is extractive. It maintains that what the researcher observes, they have never observed before and will never observe again because they are separate from the researched.

I am not separate from my research population. I do not have the privilege of a partial perspective or not dealing with the impact of my work on the community, because it is my

community. There would be no “them” and “us” and I would fall short of the disembodied scientific objectivity traditional ways of researching would strive for (Haraway, 1988). Instead, as a feminist qualitative researcher I aimed for this research project to be a grounded theory project that is accessible to the community I am a part of. I did so by re-embodiment subjectivity and being as transparent as I could be about the world I share with the participants in this study (Haraway, 1988). My knowledge of navigating racism, homophobia, and misogyny (Baily, 2010) was not cast aside, but talked about in relation to the experiences of participants. This is important too because it is my very lived conditions – or “situated knowledge” as described by Haraway (1988) – that called me to this question, needing a narrative of hope for QWOC love through the clouds of white supremacy, patriarchy, and homophobia.

### *Significance of My Study*

From what I could find in my survey of current studies, there have been no in-depth explorations into how QWOC actively resist multi-systemic oppression while forming and maintaining romantic relationships. The impact of cultural oppression is still salient for QWOC when they are in relationships (Addison & Coolhart, 2009). Given the recent increase in political hostility towards queer populations, racial minority groups, and women in the United States due to the current leadership of the country, threats to survival for QWOC are more present than ever in recent history. It is imperative to the field of marriage and family therapy that relational therapists have a framework for working with QWOC in the contemporary political context. Through using Black Feminist grounded theory frameworks, I explored the experiences of QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while participating in contemporary political activism. My dissertation study aimed to develop a framework relational therapists can use to support QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in contemporary liberation

movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, water protection, immigration and citizenship movements, and more. This framework emerged from the community, capturing the stories of the couples and the material and psychological conditions in which they are maintaining relationships. My study contributes to the dearth of literature on QWOC in intimate relationships and identifies impacts of political organizing on QWOC couples. This is significant because to my knowledge of the literature, studies on queer identities have disregarded race as a factor. Similarly, studies on clinical work with couples of color often ignore sexuality (Addison & Coolhart 2009). I am attempting to move away from the practice of treating marginalized populations as “problems to be solved” (McGoldrick, 1998) and integrate all of the socially segregated identities embodied by QWOC, hoping to bridge the separation between queer and multicultural identities (Addison & Coolhart, 2009). My study aims to answer the question: *What are the experiences of QWOC maintaining relationships while participating in contemporary movements for liberation?*

*Use of the term “Queer” and “women of color”.*

For the purposes of this paper, queer will be used as an inclusive term for women who are transgender – not identifying with the classification of sex or gender assigned to them at birth – and/or not heterosexual. Although the term is not universally used and embraced in lesbian, trans, bisexual, and intersex communities due to prior derogatory use, it is more inclusive and encompassing of the diversity among nonheteronormative female populations than popularized terms and acronyms currently used in literature – such as LBT (Singh & Chun, 2010). Queer is often referred to as a resistance term as well, reclaimed through political work by the community it used to subjugate (Addison & Coolhart, 2009). Other terms such as *homosexual* or *transsexual* have pathological roots, coined as medical diagnoses and will therefore not be used.

Additionally, they assume dichotomies of sexuality and miss the innumerable sexualities and genders that fall under the queer umbrella. Further, the term queer allows the added ability to frame populations positively, as opposed to what it is not, e.g. non-heterosexual or not cisgender. Similarly, the phrase ‘women of color’ will be used to describe the population of women who are not White. The phrase is inclusive of all non-white women while framing the group in terms of who they are as opposed to who they are not. Additionally, it includes women of multiracial descent whose multiple racial identities are often singularized for the purposes of race-based discussion. Grassroots organizer Loretta Ross described the term “women of color” as a solidarity commitment between non-White women to work with other women who have been racially oppressed as well (Western States Center, 2011). The term originated at a 1977 feminist meeting in Houston, Texas. The white majority of the conference had authored a 200-page list of demands for equality for women, dedicating 3 of those pages to what they termed “minority women’s plank”. Black feminists resisted this by authoring the Black Feminist Agenda to substitute the plank; however as Asian, Indigenous, and Latinx women joined the Black feminist caucus they renegotiated the name, settling on the term “women of color”. Because my study focused on QWOC activists I found it only fitting to use a term that emerged from feminist organizing to describe the group.

### *Significance of this study.*

The field of marriage and family therapy, and more broadly family studies, has not yet understood the experiences of QWOC in intimate relationships. This has left a paucity of literature on relational dynamics of QWOC couples and no implications for clinical work with the population. Extant knowledge in the field of marriage and family therapy related to QWOC discusses their lived experiences without incorporating their expertise on their own lives and is

often conducted by researchers who do not identify as queer women of color (Battle & Harris, 2013; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Wilson, et al., 2011). Research that investigates the experiences of queer women have focused on the experiences of white middle-class lesbians and their families (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). When QWOC are reported, studies focus specifically on Black lesbian identities, making implications for queer women of color broadly (Glass, 2014; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). These approaches narrow queerness to lesbian identities, rendering the experiences of bisexual and other sexual minority women invisible. Further, they also confine racialized experiences to Black-White binaries and do not include non-Black women of color. Explorations into lesbian couple dynamics also rarely explore gender identities.

Black feminist frameworks tell us that discussions of the lived experiences of Black women without the incorporation of their experiences result in one-dimensional portrayals of their lives and contribute to both the hypervisibility and invisibility they experience in society (Durham, 2014). Further, it reinforces the extractive legacies of research and does not honor women of color as the experts of their own lives (Brown, 2010). I propose to adopt an intersectional theory of QWOC representing their social identities as interdependent, not additive (Bowleg, 2008). In adopting a qualitative design, I aimed to present the stories of QWOC in romantic relationships while participating in political activism to produce a theory of therapy that is tied to Black feminist politics of social change to create healing environments for QWOC (Nagar & Geiger, 2007). My research aimed to depart from the theories on social identity within family therapy that present identity dimensions (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent and constructed them as interconnected to contextualize the experiences of QWOC.



## Chapter 2:

### Review of Literature

My study aimed to explore the experiences of QWOC who are maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in political activism. Because many sexuality studies have overlooked race, and multicultural studies have overlooked sexuality and gender, this review of the literature also includes texts outside of peer reviewed family therapy research journals. I included documentaries, magazine articles, and blog posts written by or about QWOC activist couples and their experiences. Recent articles and book chapters have been published outside of peer reviewed journals that speak directly to QWOC engaged in relationships and political activism. They too are integrated into the review of literature here. Also, because of the limited literature on QWOC couples, I will provide a brief overview of recent literature that covers therapeutic considerations when working with couples of color. In this chapter I will summarize the extant literature on couples of color, then describe in more depth the literature on QWOC in intimate relationships and activist couples.

#### *Couples of Color*

In the last decade more than 200 research articles have been published in academic journals on couples of color, 90 of which focused on Black couples. Only three of these results explored dynamics of Native American couples (Robbins, Ryland-Neal, Murphy, Geis, 2017). In this section I will summarize the major themes and trends in research focused on couples of color. Although I know that these racial groups are not mutually exclusive, I will separate my review by racial groups as researchers have done to date. It is quite possible that many interracial

couples and multiracial individuals were missed in these initial studies and will be categorized into one racial experience here in my review.

### **Black couples.**

Black couples have continued to be an area of interest for relational therapists over the last decade. Health related topics were popular inquiries. Several researchers explored HIV intervention effectiveness with African American couples, with the National Institute of Mental Health publishing 18 studies from a 2007 trial which surveyed 535 Black couples across the United States (El-Bassel, et al., 2016; NIMH, 2010). Overall, these HIV studies came to a similar consensus - targeted condom use effectiveness with Black couples greatly reduces new instances of HIV infections (NIMH, 2010). Additionally, other stressors such as young age, unemployment, and psychosocial variables such as histories of sexual abuse also emerged as risk factors to HIV infection.

Other researchers explored the impacts of stressors on social support, couple interactions, co-parenting relationships, and gendered marital expectations within Black couples (Barr & Simons, 2012; Stanik, McHale, & Crouter, 2013; Sutton, Simons, Simons, & Cutrona, 2017). These explorations concluded that Black couples with more egalitarian gender roles reported higher marital satisfaction and love. Clavel, Cutrona, and Russell (2017) examined how stressful events in the social support system of one partner in an African American dyad influenced the perceived support their partner experienced. Their findings suggested that supportiveness in Black dyads are shaped by the stress being faced. For example, partners who experienced financial stress were perceived as less supportive by their partners, while partners experiencing racialized discrimination were perceived as more supportive by their partners (Clavel, Cutrona,

& Russell, 2017). These studies did not include queer Black couples but did begin to highlight strengths and resilience of Black couples coming to therapy.

Chambers (2009) examined premarital counseling with middle class African American couples – a group he refers to as the “forgotten group”. This title referenced the unseen financial challenges middle class Black couples face. Chambers explained that because they were not living in poverty, their commitments to supporting extended family, children in college, and the role of money in the expression of vulnerability were overlooked (Chambers, 2009). One point that he asserts is germane to middle class African Americans is their specific strategies for dealing with racial discrimination. He explained that middle class African American couples turn towards their partners in times of racial discrimination, as opposed to allowing the stress to erode their intimacy (Chambers, 2009). He concluded with a suggestion for therapists to search for couple stories of overcoming and named resilience as a historical metaprinciple for African Americans.

Kelly and Boyd-Franklin (2009) provided a strength-based approach to working with male-female African American Couples. They summarized adverse contexts the couples typically navigate such as ongoing racism and social violence. They cited connections to family and community ties as strengths and sources of support for Black couples, naming things such as sharing of resources and sharing childcare responsibilities as strengths (Kelly & Boyd-Franklin, 2009). The researchers suggested using expressiveness and creativity – both of which they reference as African American values – in session in order to encourage feelings of achievement and success in the couple. In order to adapt treatment to African American couples, the authors continued that knowledge, skill, and awareness are crucial areas of therapeutic growth.

Helm and Carlson (2013) edited a volume titled Love, Intimacy, and the African American Couple designed to address the clinical challenges and strengths African American couples have related to romantic relationships. The first section of the volume presented the social conditions that shape relational patterns, love and intimacy among African American couples including a historical look at the ways America influenced African American couple formation and maintenance (Bethea & Allen, 2013; Helm & Carlson, 2013). The section concluded with linking how psychosocial and socioeconomic factors directly dictated when and how African American couples could form, and the remaining stereotypes from enslavement and Jim Crow eras that continue to influence Black couples. Section 2 explored male-female socialization within Black culture that informs couples (Allen & Helm, 2013; Shelton-Wheeler, 2013). The section covered the imbalanced ratio of Black women to Black men, impacts of internalized racism on partner selection, and the duty to extended family married couples hold. Section 3 covered “subgroups” of African American couples – Interracial couples; Africans and Afro-Caribbeans; Lesbian couples; and Gay couples (Helm & Carlson, 2013).

In the chapter dedicated to Lesbian and Gay couples, the authors began with a historical overview of how the gender roles and sexual expression of Black people in the United States developed. They stated that Black sexuality under the institution of Slavery in the United States was constructed as a deviant, non-normative, and animalistic sexuality. The authors maintained that these racist ideas about Black sexuality persisted post enslavement and into the Jim Crow era and were even used as justifications for banning interracial marriage (Helm & Carlson, 2013). They continued that these historical distortions left African Americans in a position of having to defend their sexual identities and lives from degrading sexual stereotypes. This often happened by adopting western ideals of family and dominant cultural ideas about sex and

relationships. The authors stated that this internalized racism morphed into sexism and homophobia within the community. The authors ended this historical look by stating that it is then necessary to examine racism and socioeconomic status when understanding the experiences of Black lesbians and gay men (Helm & Carlson, 2013).

Related specifically to African American lesbians, Helm and Carlson (2013) outlined common relationship issues and therapeutic considerations for working with the community. The first issue explored was racial sexism, which the authors described as masculinized Black women being seen as responsible for the oppression Black men face, instead of racist institutions being to blame. They stated that many African American and Afro-Caribbean women have internalized this myth, leading to an intensified negative experience of their identities, particularly if they are queer or gender non-conforming. The authors asserted that African American lesbians then become visible members of their community, but also not accepted. Many African American lesbian relationships are largely unsupported outside of their lesbian community. The authors continued that African American lesbians often report in therapy feeling conflicting loyalty to the African American community and facing homophobia, and the larger LGBT community and facing racism (Helm & Carlson, 2013). The two largest issues African American lesbian couples report in therapy according to the authors are few options of open, healthy models for their relationships and acceptance looking like silence around their sexuality within African American communities (Helm & Carlson, 2013). In addressing their relationship in session, African American lesbians may perceive any distress in their relationship as irreparable and their relationship being in trouble. The authors concluded with culturally sensitive strategies to destigmatize their identities, accounting for the impact of larger systems of oppression on relational issues.

### **Latino and Hispanic couples.**

Latinos and people of Hispanic descent currently constitute a significant percentage of the population of the United States, estimated between 15 and 35% (Rivera Marano & Roman, 2017). Latinos are arguably the largest ethnic minority in the country yet remain underrepresented in research and clinical services (Parra-Cardona, Cordova Jr., Holtrop, Escobar-Chew, & Horsford, 2009). In the past decade, there has been little relational therapy literature on the population, and those that exist focus largely on how to become culturally competent when working with Latino families. My own search for literature related to Latino couples may speak to one reason why researchers have not explored the population more. Latinos are an incredibly diverse and expansive group – encompassing people from Spanish speaking Caribbeans to Mexicans to South Americans. It is hard to imagine where the cutoff for inclusion would be to survey such an expansive group of people. What we do know from census data and relational therapy research are the five largest subgroups of Latinos in the United States. These groups in order are those from Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic (Rivera Marano & Roman, 2017). Rivera Marano and Roman (2017) gave an overview of the history of the three largest Latino groups in the United States in their chapter, detailing U.S. military service and imperialism in Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico – which is a commonwealth territory of the United States.

Rivera Marano and Roman (2017) continued providing cultural context through describing the challenges many Latinos face living in the United States. High unemployment rates and poverty continue to disproportionately impact Latinos (Rivera Marano & Roman, 2017). It follows that access to education and healthcare services are too an issue for the community. The authors underscored language and citizenship status as corresponding

influences on these struggles as well. When working with Latinos in therapy, the authors stated that three cultural values are critical for developing rapport: *respecto*; *humilidad*; and *personalismo*. *Respecto* is respect for cultural practices and each other; *humilidad* refers to humility and a non-expert stance; and *personalismo* is the principle of valuing personal relationships (Rivera Marano & Roman, 2017). The authors mentioned that LGBT Latinos may experience increased distress due to traditional gender roles also being a value in many Latino cultures.

Communication processes have been identified as a major struggle for Latino couples, with avoidance of conflict and controlling of aggression leading partners to do whatever is necessary to maintain peace (Bermudez, Keeling, & Carlson, 2009). While this may seem like a strength, researchers stated that avoidance of conflict can lead to a lack of validation of partners in a relationship. Two publications have explored this communication difficulty in Latino couples. A chapter by Bermudez, Keeling, & Carlson (2009) proposed using an art based narrative approach to externalize conflict with Latino couples. Each author provided case study examples of using narrative interventions to externalize negative emotions with Latino couples (Bermudez, Keeling, & Carlson, 2009). They asserted that the goal of their interventions was to help Latino couples experience creative and collaborative processes to describe conflict, maintaining enough distance between their couple identity and the problem to maintain a problem-solving stance. Additionally, the authors provided reauthoring questions in English and Spanish as a resource for Latino clients and therapists. They emphasized how language culturally contextualizes sessions and shape narratives of Latino couples. An art based narrative approach attempts to co-create a communication process between therapists who may not speak Spanish and Latino couples (Bermudez, Keeling, & Carlson, 2009).

Existing family therapy theories such as Emotionally Focused Therapy and scales like the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire have too been adapted to be culturally informed for work with Latino couples (Parra-Cardona, et al., 2009; Castro- Diaz, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Vélez-Pastrana, 2012). Daire et al. (2012) examined the experiences of Hispanic couples who participated in a relationship education program. Marital and relationship education has been tested as a helpful intervention for improving communication with couples who receive it, however until this study, the effectiveness with Latino populations had not been explored and white couples were overrepresented in samples (Daire, et al., 2012). A total of 37 Latino participants – 23 women and 14 men – participated in a twenty-hour prevention and relationship enhancement program. Of those who completed the program, 22 were currently in relationships. Participants were interviewed in focus groups based on their relational status and gender – meaning married women were in one group, single women in another, married men in one group, and single men in another.

Two major themes emerged from the married groups: communication and the fruits of improved communication. The theme of communication emerged from specific comments participants made about acquiring new skills related to communication and comparing their old communication behaviors to their new behaviors (Daire, et al., 2012). The second theme of “fruits” referred to things that shifted in their homes, such as more intimate moments with their partners and feeling more loving towards children. An unexpected subtheme of “fruits” was Latino participants “paying it forward” by teaching extended family members things they learned in the communication training. Researchers concluded that dissimilarly to previous studies with white couples, communication training with members of Latino dyads led to extended family benefits as well (Daire, et al., 2012).



### **Asian American couples.**

Like the ethnic groups covered thus far, Asian Americans are a varied and vast group. Constituting about 6% of the United States population, Asian Americans represent the fastest growing immigrant group in the country (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). This is not surprising given the history of immigration quotas and imperialism in the East by the United States. Small numbers of Asian families immigrated to the United States in the 1800's, but nearly a century of laws, national origin quotas, and other citizenship bans in the United States in the following years limited Asian immigration until the Immigration Act of 1965 (Rastogi, 2009). Since the repeal of these restrictions, Asian immigration has greatly increased, particularly in the past few years when the Asian American population grew 72%, from 11 million in 2001 to 20.4 million in 2015 (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). It is estimated that nearly 73% of Asian American adults were born in another country. These are estimates because many Asians who are from or moved to the many islands that are now the state of Hawaii were granted US citizenship in 1959 but are hard to capture in reductionistic immigration research (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). While no single country of origin dominates the Asian American population, as of 2015 24% of Asian Americans were of Chinese origin (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017).

Shi and Wang (2009) provided the earliest model for working with immigrant Chinese couples. They explained that Chinese couples are navigating three primary contexts: Chinese culture, the influence of the communist takeover in 1949, and living in the United States – a context they call “negotiating the East and West” (Shi & Wang, 2009). The authors held that the guiding belief when working with Chinese couples must be to hold the couple within its cultural context, including the large extended family network it is a part of. Loyalty to the extended family then becomes a common topic in therapy with Chinese couples. The authors stated that

this is due to the moral commitment of vertical orientation of Chinese families – caring for ageing elders and children – clashing with American orientations of self-exploration and couple identity. Another challenge faced by acculturating Chinese couples is a disparity between the rate of acculturation of spouses (Kim & Sung, 2016; Shi & Wang, 2009). The acculturation process includes learning a new language and exposure to American culture. Shi and Wang (2009) stated that couple responses to acculturation differences are gendered. When couples are more traditional, wives are typically less acculturated and their marriage relationship was less disturbed.

Researchers Kim and Sung (2016) found that acculturation discrepancies that did not fit traditional norms were associated with intimate partner violence. They collected data from 166 Chinese couples in New York City who sought intimate partner violence counseling services at a local Chinese community agency via self-report surveys. The average length of marriage for the participants in the study was 12 years (Kim & Sung, 2016). The researchers found that for male partners, psychological problems resulting from difficulty acculturating such as depression, substance use, and aggression are stigmatized within the Chinese community and went unaddressed until they progressed to more serious problems – including intimate partner violence. When wives achieved higher educational levels, English ability, and support networks than their husbands, they were more likely to be victims of intimate partner violence (Kim & Sung, 2016).

A 2016 study compared 36 Chinese, 33 Western (Australian), and 54 Chinese-Western heterosexual couples (Hiew, Halford, van der Vijver, & Liu, 2016). The researchers tested cultural differences in communication by assessing couple communication during both problem talk and positive reminiscing. They concluded that most cultural differences were related to the

woman's culture. Chinese women used less validation and discussed less with their partners than Western women did, regardless of the culture of their partner. Hiew and her team also developed the Chinese-Western Intercultural Couple Standards Scale (2015) which assessed relationship standards that vary between Chinese partners and Western partners. These relationship standards included expressions of intimacy, relations with extended family, gender roles, demonstrations of love, responsiveness to intimacy, and social image and credibility (Hiew, Halford, van de Vijver, & Liu, 2015).

Other recent research on Asian American couples centers South Asian – or Desi – Americans, who account for another 23% of the Asian American population (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). South Asian refers to people from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other parts of the Indian sub-continent (Almeida, 2009). South Asians similarly are impacted by acculturation and are commonly described as being in one of three groups: “Americanized, bicultural, or traditional (Rastogi, 2009). These groups are not necessarily related to how long a South Asian person has been in America, but instead is more closely linked to the amount of stress they experienced when immigrating. Factors such as age, acceptance by the dominant culture, English skill, family support, financial support, and education all contribute to how much acculturation stress South Asians experience (Rastogi, 2009).

Rastogi (2009) explored how gender impacts South Asian couples in America and how to attend to gender with these couples. South Asian men and women hear gendered messages around who is supposed to show care and vulnerability in relationships, messages that “banish” young boys from the world of their mothers. Rastogi linked this to the caretaking and relationship maintenance that is expected of South Asian girls and women, often resulting in financial dependence and failure to live up to the feminine role expectations set for them. Needs

of certain family members – boys and men – get prioritized, which Rastogi stated puts women at risk of mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Rastogi, 2009). She continued that a large amount of this traditional gender socialization continues even after the second generation of immigration to the United States – across socioeconomic status.

Sharing experiences from her own clinical work with South Asian couples, the author stated that common presenting problems include communication trouble, obligations to help their extended families, infidelity, feeling like “outsiders” within the United States, and relational problems associated with DSM diagnoses. She outlined a three-step suggestion of couples therapy with South Asian Couples. First, she suggested that therapists interrogate their Western ideals of health and wellness for relationships. Then, understand the couple’s presenting issue in a gendered way using a feminist lens. Lastly, note the couple’s contextual factors – such as educational background, religion, and immigration status – as they relate to the presenting concerns and gender norms (Rastogi, 2009).

Almeida (2009) started her chapter with a larger discussion of differentiating Desi culture from violence. She asserted that patriarchal customs take different forms across cultural groups but nevertheless are present. She discussed two distortions in the little literature that is available on Desi couples. The first distortion she noted was the overlooking of ways South Asians seek support simply because they do not seek institutional therapeutic resources in the US, which are typically White-centric (Almeida, 2009). She continued that cultural literature even echoes this by striving to have therapists – read White – meet clients – read non-White – where they are and bring them to where institutions think they ought to be. Secondly, the author says that literature seems to point to South Asian culture as an oppressive practice that accounts for gendered violence against women. While she maintained that all cultures are enactors of oppressive

practices, culture in itself is not a synonym for oppression and called for a distinction between the two (Almeida, 2009). She made this distinction by stating that bride burnings and dowries are violence, not culture. The intergenerational transmission of celebrations, rituals and stories are culture. She continued that only couples and cultures of color have been written about in this way, which points to an undercurrent of racism. The author then highlighted that India's culture of social hierarchy must be understood within the context of invasion and colonization that the sub-continent experienced. She concluded that couples therapy with Desi couples must have a social justice base, pursuing justice at every level of society.

Almeida's chapter reminded me of a 1997 essay by Uma Narayan. In this essay, the author connected domestic violence and dowry-murder. The justification for death of women by burning became "cultural" after the issue crossed borders – becoming a topic of conversation in the West (Narayan, 1997). Women murdered by their partners in the United States were most often shot, at similar rates to dowry-murders in India. However, without a name for this shooting death phenomenon in the United States, the issue disappeared women into violent crime statistics and domestic violence conversations focused on non-lethal forms of domestic violence (Narayan, 1997). This seemed to rank the domestic abuse of women painted as the "other" – here Indian woman – as more severe and inherently different from the domestic abuse of women in the U.S. context. Narayan stated that while the means of lethal intimate partner violence may be cultural, the violence against women transcends borders. Both authors urge Western feminists to take into account the types of third world women's issues that cross borders, and to be mindful of the colonialist transformation these issues go through when they do cross boarders (Almeida, 2009; Narayan, 1997).

This not only connects to the transnational border crossing discussed in not relating dowry-murder to domestic violence, but also relates to the partial problems extracted from women of color in the United States to retain the ‘sameness’ of Western women. Western women’s issues become equated to White middle-class cisgender women’s issues – as seen in the 2017 women’s march on Washington in opposition to the newly elected president of the United States. Signs reading, “If I wanted to have the government in my pussy, I’d fuck a senator” and similar sentiments lined the crowds. This erased the long legacy of government interference with women of color’s reproductive rights and forced sterilizations in the U.S. Over that weekend, ‘pussy’ also became a stand in for ‘woman’, falsely making this a universal commonality among women. Almeida (2009) talked about heterosexism and homophobia as results of patriarchy and racism colliding.

### **Native and Indigenous couples.**

The current terms in use for Native Americans are numerous and some are considered more socially acceptable than others. *First Nations* and *Native American* are two of the most common terms in recent research literature (Derrick, 2009). Some literature from Canada uses the term *Aboriginal*, and less frequently, *American Indian* (Derrick, 2009). I have experienced that other terms such as *Indigenous* and *Native* are commonly used among Native activists or in political conversations. In this section, I will use the terminology the author used when discussing literature on persons of Native ancestry, and when discussing my own interpretations of research, I will use ‘Native’. Native Americans make up 2 percent of the US population comprising 22 ethnic groups and over 530 tribes (Robbins, Ryland-Neal, Murphy, & Geis, 2017). It is important when discussing the population of Natives in the United States to consider

that 44% of Native American respondents to the US Census listed more than one race with White (63%) and Black (13%) being the most common responses (Robbins, 2017).

Natives are often overlooked in research and left out of conversations on race and ethnicity. Outside of much earlier studies on Native alcoholism and suicide, it was hard to find any literature on Native couples, which angered me. My search reminded me of a piece by Cherokee feminist and anti-violence activist Andrea Smith called “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy” (2016). In it she discussed genocide/colonialism as a pillar, defined by disappearing of indigenous peoples. She explained that this does not just mean “disappearing” indigenous peoples through genocide or freezing them as a point in American history, but also disappearing them in the public imagination by “presenting their absence” (Smith, 2016). Native scholar Jann Derrick (2009) stated that perhaps this absence of Natives in relational therapy is similarly due to Western cultures positioned as a norm. This according to Derrick ignores the impact of history, oppression, and colonization on Native Americans, and the destructive role mental health professionals played in that process (Derrick, 2009). Thankfully, three recent chapters by Native scholars emerged in my search, all of which I will review here.

The 2009 chapter by Derrick outlined Native couple therapy. She began that in working with Native couples, we must first interrogate the cultural perspective of Natives as dysfunctional (Derrick, 2009). She continued that First Nations couples come from historical contexts that justify their distrust in the Medicine Wheel – traditional approaches to mental health. The underlying relationship of genocide and trauma between Europeans and Native Peoples is ever present for Natives seeking services in America. The author continued that it is critical to the therapeutic relationship that the therapist and clients understand the impact genocide has had on the couple or their families. For example, common experiences include forced attendance to

residential schools, transracial adoption into White families, and living on reservations. It is important to know if either partner has had these experiences or how these things may have impacted their families.

Derrick (2009) depathologized Native culture and values and presents them as a circular system model for working with Native couples based on key factors from Native cultures. Key factors to incorporate in therapy with Native couples included the ultimate life goal of becoming self-aware and self-disciplined, all life forms being viewed as equal, and the family as the primary building block of communities (Derrick, 2009). She highlighted the healing, rebalancing, and survivorship themes in Native couple relationships as strengths to create change in the couple relationship. Also, she added that often Native couples are seen as a marrying of two families and may incorporate other family members in their couple sessions, especially children as the child is seen as the center of the family and a physical representation of the couple relationship (Derrick, 2009). Therapists should be open to this and not discourage other family members from attending Native couples sessions.

Berg (2009) similarly began his chapter on working with Native American couples with the trauma genocide has caused. Century-long practices of removing First Nations children from their homes and requiring them to no longer speak their languages or have contact with their families continued well into the 1950's. In 1961, 14 of these schools were still in existence in the United States (Berg, 2009). Berg asserted that Narrative therapy practices combined with Emotionally Focused Couples therapy (EFT) is a trauma responsive way of working with Native couples that allows for reauthoring of colonial trauma. He continued that this is accomplished through rejecting "essential truths" and carefully hearing stories from the couple, paying specific attention to emotion and meaning making. The author concluded with a case example of how



taking steps to ameliorate the invasive quality of asking questions, situating ourselves transparently in relation to First Nations couples, and talking about social differences early and often facilitates a therapeutic relationship with First Nations couples.

A 2017 chapter by Robbins, Ryland-Neal, Murphy, and Geis summarized the challenges faced by Native American couples. This chapter addressed how gender roles and dominant relationship norms such as monogamy may differ within Native American cultures. The authors stated that in some of the largest tribes such as Cherokee and Choctaws, matrilineal practices were the norm, with women controlling their sexualities and husbands moving in with their wives families (Robbins, Ryland-Neal, Murphy, & Geis, 2017). The process of separating or divorcing also differ in Native American communities. It is common for divorces to only be initiated by the wives and entail no formalities. The authors stated that divorces in Cherokee communities typically look as simple as a wife setting her husband's belongings outside of their shared home. The authors added that Native American cultures continue to have prevalent views that as many as seven genders exist, and that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans identities hold no stigma. The authors noted that while these practices may look different today because of colonization, these matrilineal values are still strong in many Native American families.

The authors highlighted several common issues seen in couples therapy with Native Americans. The first issue they explored was the loss of cultural identity and status in the larger US society. Common presenting concerns such as sexual trauma, drug and alcohol misuse, and family power struggles must be understood within this context according to the authors (Robbins et al., 2017). Intimate partner violence was also a common issue addressed by the authors. They stated that Native American men and women experience more intimate partner violence than any other ethnic group by comparison (Robbins et al., 2017). Extended family and couple stress

related to caring for elders also presented as a common concern for Native American couples. The authors explained that because extended family play vital roles in raising and caring for children in the community, adult children within families often feel the obligation to care for their aging aunts, uncles, and cousins (Robbins et al., 2017). To address these issues, the authors suggested Native American Place-Focused therapy (Robbins et al., 2017). A strong sense of land, place, and nature as the source of their culture and traditions permeates Native American communities. The authors asserted that a focus on place is central to understanding and engaging Native American couples in therapy who deal with intergenerational issues of displacement and not belonging (Robbins et al., 2017). Native American Place-Focused therapy directly confronts these issues by incorporating the couple's beliefs about healing, spirituality, and communication. Core features of Native American Place-Focused therapy include storying how the couple came to be where they are, reframing problems as land-related metaphors, and decolonizing conversations – conversations that link their present problems to the history of colonization in the United States. To my knowledge, there have been no studies exploring the experiences of queer Native couples.

### *QWOC in Intimate Relationships*

As I previously stated, literature on QWOC couples is sparse. In this section I will review the few explorations into the experiences of QWOC in intimate relationships and summarize their findings. The first study that explored the experiences of oppression and health outcomes for QWOC was conducted by Wilson, Okwu, and Mills (2011), focusing on Black lesbian and bisexual women. The researchers sought to test how impactful experiences of oppression were on Black lesbian and bisexual women's self-reported health ratings. Researchers selected Black lesbian and bisexual women because of their social location at the intersections of multiple forms

of oppression (Collective, 1977). They hypothesized that experiencing multiple forms of oppression would predict poorer mental health. To explore this question the researchers collected data at a 2007 event for lesbians of African descent held in California. Researchers reported using a convenience sample, announcing the study at a workshop at the event. Approximately 60% of the workshop attendees completed anonymous self-report questionnaires. The participant pool consisted of 85 Black women, 84% of which were African American and 67% who identified as lesbians (Wilson, Okwu, & Mills, 2011). The average age of participants was 49 years old and 80% of the sample earned more than \$50,000 annually. (Wilson, Okwu, & Mills, 2011). The questionnaire had five main foci: health status; health behaviors; health beliefs; health care access; and demographics.

Researchers conducted inferential analyses including bivariate analyses using Pearson  $r$  correlation tests and structural equation modeling to evaluate depression as an intervening variable (Wilson, et al., 2011). They reported that respondents listed many forms of oppression typically not considered in discussions of oppression with Black lesbians and bisexual women, such as weight-based oppression and ageism (Wilson, et al., 2011). Researchers also reported that their correlation tests suggested that respondents who reported experiences with heterosexism reported higher levels of subjective physical health. The findings reported by researchers suggests that experiences of heterosexism significantly predict higher subjective scores of perceived health, but do not predict depression levels (Wilson, et al., 2011).

Additionally, researchers concluded that higher body mass index levels predicted experiences of weight-based oppression, higher levels of depression, and lower levels of perceived health. What the researchers are saying with these conclusions is that different forms of oppression impacted subjective health scores differently. Heterosexism did not correlate with low subjective health

scores, but experiences of weight-based oppression – such as being denied a job or date because of one's size – did correlate with low subjective health scores. The researchers ended that more research is needed to fully understand the interaction of multiple forms of oppression on how QWOC experience their health.

Glass and Few-Demo (2013) contributed a relational study to the literature on QWOC couples next, exploring the complexities of social support arrangements for Black lesbian couples. Their qualitative study aimed to examine how 11 Black lesbian couples received informal social support from their social networks (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). The researchers first identified the ways in which extended families provided support to Black lesbian couples, then examined how Black lesbian couples responded to this support and concluded with a reflection on the LGBTQ community as a source of social support for Black lesbian couples. The researcher sought to answer two main questions using their integrative theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and Black feminist theory: what informal supports are available to Black lesbian couples; and how do Black lesbian couples utilize these supports? Participants in their study were recruited using a snowball sampling method (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Each member of the couple had to identify as Black, the couple had to be cohabitating, and the couple had to have been together for at least one year to be considered for the study. Participants ranged from 27 to 44 years old and current relationship duration ranged from 1 to 10 years. Each couple participated in 60 to 90-minute dyadic semi-structured interviews conducted by the first researcher. These interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The transcripts were coded by the researchers. Both researchers also kept research journals and consistently discussed their own biases in relation to the data and how they are both situated in the data.

Couples in the study discussed ways they experience social support from three main communities: family of origin and extend family; church; and lesbian communities (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). The most significant source of social support reported by the couples came from family members, specifically biologically related women. The Black lesbian couples in the study reported their familial relations by tracing their support and lineages through women they were related to (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Extended family members of the women in the couples supported them individually in their roles, such as mothers and daughters, but not necessarily in their roles as partners and as a couple (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Also, extended family members supported the partner of their Black lesbian relatives as members of their racial community, but not as the sexual partners of their relative. Couples also reported that their partners were accepted as “helpful friends” instead of romantic partners. The participating Black lesbian couples reported that their local LGBTQ communities provided occasional social support.

Partners in the participating couples reported participating in the LGBTQ community as individuals – such as joining gay fraternities – and not as a couple or family (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). The participants with children also reported that the local LGBTQ community largely focused on nightlife, which meant that they often could not participate or meet others in the community. Contrastingly, a theme of strong support from the LGBTQ community around being lesbian parents emerged from the interviewees, reporting that other lesbians often provided childcare for the couple (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Lastly, the couples reported church as a source of social support. The couples reported that while being connected to a church community was important for them, they often did not feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality or relationship within these communities. Within church communities the couples deemphasized

their roles as lesbians and partners, and emphasized their roles as mothers and sisters. They described making their relationships ‘invisible’ for church, and attending church for themselves, not for the couple relationship (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013).

Battle and Harris (2013) expanded the refereed literature on QWOC beyond Black American women with their national study on the impact of community support, the importance of sexual orientation, and racial identity on sociopolitical involvement of Latinas. The researchers hypothesized that sociopolitical involvement would be directly correlated with feelings of support and acceptance in communities (Battle & Harris, 2013). The data for this survey was a subset of a larger survey conducted in 2010 aimed at detailing the experiences of LGBT people of color. The larger survey was collected from a sample of 5,000 respondents throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. Of those respondents, 379 women identified as Latina and were included in the current study (Battle & Harris, 2013). Respondents ranged from 15 to 78 years of age, with an average age of 32. Sociopolitical involvement was measured by how frequently respondents read LGBT or people of color magazines, participated in political events, received services from LGBT or people of color organizations, donated money to LGBT or people of color organizations, or used LGBT or people of color social networking sites (Battle & Harris, 2013). To explore the effects of community and identity on the LGBT sociopolitical involvement of bisexual and lesbian Latinas, the researchers ran four multivariate analysis models.

Results indicated respondents that reported a connection to the LGBT community and being out about their identity reported higher levels of LGBT related sociopolitical involvement. The level of comfort participants reported in relation to the LGBT community did not impact their level of sociopolitical involvement (Battle & Harris, 2013). Comfort within the LGBT

community did however have a negative impact on people of color sociopolitical involvement. This means that the more comfortable participants reported being within the LGBT community, the less political involvement they reported related to people of color issues. Additionally, researchers reported that comfort and support within people of color communities was negatively significant for people of color sociopolitical involvement, meaning that the more support respondents had from people of color communities, the less likely they were to participate in people of color activism (Battle & Harris, 2013).

Building on her 2013 study, Glass (2014) continued explorations into Black lesbian couples' experiences through describing how 11 Black lesbian couples negotiated family rituals. Again, using the transcribed data from the semi-structured dyadic interviews with 11 Black lesbian couples, the researcher sought to understand how rituals – defined as social experiences that strengthen connection to family, spirituality, and identity – are negotiated with extended families by Black lesbian couples (Glass, 2014). Interviewees reported that being involved in family rituals was an essential part of their identity as Black women. The theme of drawing a sense of strength and connection to community emerged from the interviews conducted. Interviewees also described having to manage their identities in this study, and due to having to hide elements of their relationship, did not experience validation of their partnership from extended family rituals for their roles as lesbian-identified partners. The researcher concluded that this caused a broken acknowledgement of multiple identities and that the partners only experienced partial identity acknowledgement from participating in family rituals (Glass, 2014).

Ritual experiences in three main categories were described by interviewees: family of origin and extended family rituals; couple's rituals; and commitment ceremonies (Glass, 2014). At family rituals, interviewees reported desexualizing their relationships in different ways. One

of the ways couples reported de-emphasizing their sexual relationship was by bringing partners to events, but keeping assumptions about their relationship to one another vague by not showing physical intimacy (Glass, 2014). The interviewees described feeling welcome as individuals, but their role as lesbian partners were not welcomed. For the theme of couple's rituals, interviewees reported rituals of their religious communities as important, again reporting that their coupled experience was not a part of their churchgoing experience (Glass, 2014). For religious holidays, the participants reported focusing on their current family. Also, reported in this theme couple's experiences of their own weddings feeling like the one time they could present themselves as committed couples and celebrate their multiple identities (Glass, 2014). Pride festivals were reported as supportive rituals for the couple as well, but overall couples reported infrequent attendance to LGBT community rituals (Glass, 2014). The researcher concluded from these themes that Black lesbian couples found comfort in their identities through privatized ritual experiences such as holiday celebrations, housewarmings, and weddings (Glass, 2014).

In 2016, Brooks examined how Black transgender and lesbian women in North Philadelphia could negotiate their identities and stay within their racial communities. In the framing of the study, the author summarized from writings by trans people of color that transgender people of color view their race as a master status, and transgender identity awareness develops later, eventually becoming integrated with their racial identity (Brooks, 2016). The researcher sought to understand how homophobia and transphobia in the Black community and racism in the LGBT community shape the identity management of LGBT Black women living in North Philadelphia (Brooks, 2016). Brooks named this negotiation 'staying in' (Brooks, 2016). Staying in is defined by two performances: being out in the Black community but not upholding LGBT politics; or being out in Black spaces and being politically active around LGBT issues as



opposed to being active in white LGBT spaces (Brooks, 2016). The sample in this qualitative study was composed of 23 LGBT-identified Black women who ranged in age from 19 to 53 sampled through snowball sampling methods. Five of the participants identified as transgender women. All the respondents participated in interviews conducted by the researcher.

Feelings of belonging in the North Philadelphia community emerged as a theme from the interviewees (Brooks, 2016). The women interviewed reported having family in the community that created a sense of safety and family in the neighborhood. Similarly, other participants reported remaining in the neighborhoods they grew up in was safer than relocating to the “gayborhood” in North Philadelphia due to these connections. Unsafe moments in the neighborhoods they chose to stay in were related to the overall violence in the areas such as drug disputes and gang violence as opposed to targeted homophobia or transphobia (Brooks, 2016). Lesbian visibility – discussed mostly by masculine lesbians in the sample – reported mixed experiences with their visibility within the community. One theme that emerged was ‘passing as one of the boys’ which kept them safe within the neighborhood and another was the unsafety of public transportation, being asked for their identification or harassed by men. Transgender women in the sample similarly reported unsafe experiences while commuting using public transportation and of passing as cisgender women (Brooks, 2016).

A theme of blending politically into the Black community also emerged from participant interviews. Participants reported organizing in their neighborhood around issues that impact them as LGBT women, but also the larger Black community such as struggles against the prison system, unemployment, housing discrimination and homelessness, poverty, and substance use (Brooks, 2016). Deidentifying with LGBT spaces and politics emerged as a theme from participants also. The participants reported not identifying with LGBT politics because of class

and race issues imbedded in mainstream lesbian politics such as gay marriage debates. Instead, participants stayed in their community and educated Black people about LGBT identities (Brooks, 2016).

While these studies begin to chart the path to documenting experiences of Black lesbian women, there are still elements of QWOC couples that have gone unexamined. Researchers have relied heavily on snowball sampling methods to access QWOC population and many drew from participants in pride festivities. It is possible that women who participate in LGBT pride events may vary in significant ways from QWOC who do not participate. Many of the studies only explored cisgender Black lesbian and bisexual women (i.e., Glass, 2014; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Wilson et al, 2011). Only one study has explored the experience of queer Latinas (Battle & Harris, 2013). Asian, Indigenous, and multiracial women are noticeably absent from discussions of navigating community involvement and relationships. The popularized acronym LGBT is used across studies, even though sample demographics may lack transgender or bisexual representation. Additionally, researchers have seldom situated themselves in relation to participants. Escaping privileged social locations should not be the goal of addressing subjectivity in feminist inquiries into the experiences of QWOC. Instead it reinforces hegemonic structures of power and researchers exist in a non-racialized space while their participants remain seen and racialized. Here, I also question if white researchers can state that they are utilizing a Black or women of color feminism as a framework, given they do not navigate the world as women of color. It seems more reasonable to say that their work is informed by women of color feminists than to say that they identify as Black feminists and therefore use it as a framework for their research.

### *Couples engaged in Political Activism*

The earliest exploration into the impact of activism on family dynamics was a 1994 study by Dunham and Bengtson. The researchers compared the timing of marriage and birth of children between those who were activists and non-activists during the 1960's (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994). Their design was longitudinal, surveying the 341 participants initially in 1971 and again in 1985. In 1971, the average age of the sample was 19 years and in 1985 the average age of the sample was 33 years. No other demographic information on the sample was provided, but it should be noted that participants were not partnered with each other and were instead individuals pulled from a larger survey sample (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994).

The researchers operationalized activism to mean direct actions such as demonstrations, protests, and sit ins during the 1960's and participants who reported participating in at least one of those activities were classified as activists (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994). Researchers reported findings comparing timing of marriage, first child, and second child between activists and non-activists in their sample. They found that higher educational attainment and more liberal gender roles were significantly correlated with lower instances of marriage; however, when the variable of activism was added, only educational attainment remained significant (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994). These findings held consistent for timing of first child as well. The more liberal gender role attitudes and higher education attainment, the lower the instance of the birth of a first child. When engaged in political activism, only educational attainment remained significant. For participants who reported having more than one child, no difference was found between activists and non-activists.

Kan and Heath (2006) sought to explore the influence husbands and wives had over each other's political behavior related to voting. The authors explained that political homogamy – the practice of people with similar political affiliations marrying – explains a great deal about why

partners are more like each other in voting behaviors than they are dissimilar (Kan & Heath, 2006). To test their hypothesis that partners will vote the political alignment of the partner who contributes the greater financial resources to their family, the researchers ran a series of nested multinomial logistic regression models on husband-wife dyads (Kan & Heath, 2006). These models were intended to predict political party preference – categorized as conservative, liberals, or other parties –separately for men and women to explore how each is related to the wife’s orientations around home and work, their dependence on their husbands for resources, and both partners’ political values (Kan & Heath, 2006). Findings of the study found that wives tended to vote their husband’s political affiliation across financial resource backgrounds of the husbands. The researchers also reported that when wives were responsible for financial resources, husbands voted dissimilarly to their wives (Kan & Heath, 2006). The researchers concluded that the influence on the voting behavior of spouses is more directly determined by gender than by economic dependence. Further, they concluded that wives have little influence on their husband’s political views, while husbands have more influence on their wife’s political views. The researchers did not explore how partners may be impacted by sexism. Additionally, this was not a longitudinal study, and variables such as economic dependence and political alignment may change over time.

Stephan (2010) explored the political agency of Middle Eastern women in her case study of Laure Moghaizel – a women’s rights activist in Lebanon. Combining historical texts, diaries from Moghaizel, and semi-structured interviews of her close associates, the researcher explored multiple dimensions of Moghaizel’s activism (Stephan, 2010). Stephan explored the social structures that called Moghaizel to activism; her contribution to the women’s rights movement in Lebanon; her relationship with her husband; and the influence their relationship had on women’s

rights activism (Stephan, 2010). The researcher's exploration points to family feminism as the social structure that moved Moghaizel to political activism (Stephan, 2010). Unlike the individualistic ideals of the women's rights movements of the west, the researcher asserted that women's movements in the Middle East that Moghaizel participated in and eventually spearheaded valued the roles of women as sisters, mothers, and wives and therefore saw family and women's rights as a continuum (Stephan, 2010).

Moghaizel organized a coalition between women's rights organizations in Lebanon that sought to increase women's participation in vocational and educational training and an organization focused on rights for young mothers (Stephan, 2010). The researcher also linked Moghaizel's role in a traditional marriage where she was a housewife who provided all of the care for her children to her ability to be politically active, stating that women in more traditional marriages tend to have more community involvement and therefore more able to organize politically (Stephan, 2010). Stephan concluded from her excavation of Moghaizel's career as a political activist that the social capital associated with her traditional heteronormative marriage actually furthered her political success. Ways in which it did so was allowing men to see themselves as stakeholders in family feminism; affording women time to organize politically; and positioning women's rights in relation to other human rights (Stephan, 2010).

Another case study conducted by González Castillo (2017) detailed the engagement of youth in political activism and the collapse of a Zapatista Café after the young couple organizing to sustain it ended their romantic relationship. This case study was compiled from the field journal of the researcher who was engaged in a case study with a different focus and objective for their dissertation project. González Castillo stated that the intersections of love and politics had yet to be explored with youth organizers. Filling this gap, the researcher combined his notes

with transcribed interviews of the young activists who organized around keeping Caracol, the Zapatista Café in the city of Puebla, open (González Castillo, 2017). The researcher sought to offer a description of how the café functioned politically and the participation of the two young organizers as activists. Caracol was a coalition between the Zapatistas – a first citizen’s indigenous Mexican activist community – and a student magazine collective from the local university. The introduction of the two groups to one another introduced Adela – a 24-year-old organizing with the Zapatistas – and Octavio – a 26-year-old working on politicizing the student magazine (González Castillo, 2017). The two quickly fell in love and began organizing together through Caracol. Together, the couple turned Caracol into the Zapatista’s largest café and grew the collective of youth organizing through the café large enough to open a second location.

Although the café was run collectively by the volunteers and organizers, the researcher reported that Octavio and Adela seemed to contribute the most time, money, and passion to the project (González Castillo, 2017). After the second location opened, Adela spent more time in the new building and eventually the relationship between her and Octavio deteriorated. Soon after she began seeing another member of the collective volunteering in the new building. The researcher stated that it was hard to explain what precisely broke down in the organizing that had initially birthed the two locations, but that after the couple split, members of the coalition felt as if they had to pick a side in the separation (González Castillo, 2017). As this happened, conflicts emerged between members volunteering at the separate. What was once a vigorous political project collapsed due to internal conflict after the couple broke up. González Castillo concluded from this experience that love is a core tenant of political organizing and intimacy is necessary for sustaining effective political work (González Castillo, 2017).

These four studies began to highlight the connections between politics and love, but none explored dynamics specific to queer couples. Dunham and Bengtson (1994) conducted a longitudinal study beginning post-Civil Rights movements in the United States in the 1960's. No demographic information was provided outside of age of their participants, but heteronormative relationship and marital assumptions permeated their conclusions – specifically that men would partner with women and father children with them (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994). There are long legacies of queer women of color participating in activist movements – particularly those of the Civil Rights era – that were not captured in their study. Similarly, the other researchers used heterosexual case studies to illustrate how intimacy sustains political work (González Castillo, 2017) and how being partnered affords women time to organize politically (Stephan, 2010).

Given that QWOC who are in romantic relationships may also experience intimacy as sustaining their political work and affording them more time to do so, my study explored how they make sense of the impact their relationship has had on their political work, and the impact their political work has had on their relationship. The current political movements in the United States have also gone unexplored while organizing efforts of previous generations have been studied (Dunham & Bengtson, 1994). My study differs from previous studies in the way that I interviewed organizers while they were currently engaged in political activism. The movements that I was interested in were also ongoing at the time of the research, making my study different from those that ask participants to recollect their experiences organizing. This timeliness also provides therapists information to create therapeutic alliances and environments with QWOC as they need it in the present.

### Chapter 3:

#### Methodology

Because my study aimed to develop a framework marriage and family therapists can use to support QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in contemporary liberation movements, I used a Black feminist narrative grounded theory approach. Utilizing Bowleg's (2008) recommendations for intersectional Black feminist qualitative research, Charmaz' (2014) grounded theory, and Narrative methodologies (Stacey, 1988; White & Epston, 1990; Kovach, 2010) I conducted a Black feminist grounded theory study. This chapter will situate me in relation to this study by exploring my social location and identity. There will also be an overview of the three theories undergirding this study in this chapter. Lastly, I will detail my recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

#### *Self of the Researcher*

My study explores the experiences of QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in political activism. Due to my embodied experiences as a Black woman who identifies as a lesbian and my lived experiences as a political activist with radical liberatory politics, I must start my methodology with an overt examination of my own sexual and relational development as a Black girl. My research question and interests feel as if they were birthed in my resistance of oppression and trying to be loved, therefore I will also examine my development as a political activist. In the words of Assata Shakur, "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppressions" (Shakur, 1971). I examine my own processes around activism and my identity development here because they informed my interest in this topic and undoubtedly informed this research project.



I am a Black cisgender woman born in the millennial generation. I am a lesbian who was raised by three generations of single mothers. I grew up the oldest child of three daughters in Queens, New York in poverty. I am the first person to graduate from high school on both sides of my family. I practice what can best be described as an Afro-diasporic ancestor reverence spirituality. Although many aspects of my identity allow me access to resources – such as being a United States citizen and a graduate research assistant in a doctoral program at a prestigious white serving institution – my experiences growing up as a Black girl in poverty still feel the most present for me in this moment of having a man who was openly endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan elected to presidency. The spaces of access and privilege I can participate in at this moment feel temporary, in contrast to the daily reminders of how permanent my identities as a Black lesbian woman are.

My early memories are of my entire family - cousins, aunts, grandparents, and parents - all living in one house combining incomes and supporting the kids. Because there is only a three year difference between me and my middle sister, I do not remember a time before being a big sister. Similarly, I do not remember a time before being aware of racial differences and that I and my family were Black. My family was the only Black American family on our block, so as far back as my memory will recall, I have always known that I was a Black girl. My understanding being Black has been so tightly intertwined with my understanding of being a girl that the two feel inseparable. What has changed over time has been my understanding of my racial identity in relation to privilege, oppression, white supremacy, and Blackness as a transnational identity.

My parents were together until the birth of my baby sister. I was six years old when they separated. Although my relationship with my father was scarce and has grown increasingly so

with time, my interactions with him and playing basketball are my earliest memories of what I call my gender moments of truth. I never felt as if I wanted to be a boy, but I knew I was breaking the rules of girlhood, according to him. These were my earliest moments of knowing that I was expected to do certain things because I had been assigned female at birth, and that I identified as a girl. But the way I wanted to be a girl bumped up against the way the world wanted me to be a girl.

My mother helped me figure out some of the bumps of Black girlhood. My mother worked as a factory worker and then as a security guard until a debilitating accident that happened when I was in 7th grade. She too was breaking the rules of girlhood. She was my earliest picture of femininity - long acrylic nails and a security guard uniform. Although her life told me one story of what Black womanhood could be, she flooded me with other possibilities of Black womanhood through books written by other Black women. She presented my sisters and I with possibility models for who we could be as Black girls, even in ways that were very different from how she was. This planted the seeds for me of how expansive and diverse Black girlhood is and made me feel less like I was breaking rules, because the rules just never seemed to work for Black girls. When her and my father separated, she moved us in with my grandmother and great-grandmother who similarly cultivated a sense of pride in my sisters and I around being Black girls. In so many ways the three of them were my parents. Together, my mother, grandmother, and great grandma made me feel as if being both Black and a girl was some sort of superpower, allowing me to shape shift, create, and transform the world. My home environment with three generations of Black women instilled in me the importance of my race and a sense of pride in being a Black American.

I am also reminded of how the media and culture of New York City shaped my racial and gender awareness. I was born in 1989 and grew up in the golden age of Hip Hop. I never knew a time without Hip Hop, both as a genre of music and a cultural movement by Black and Latino communities devastated by poverty. I grew up with images of Black girls bringing the wreck (Pough, 2004) defining themselves through Hip Hop and rap. I remember dancing to MC Lyte cassette tapes in my room as a kindergartener. In elementary school, I begged my mother to do my hair like Da Brat. I forced my younger sisters to learn TLC dance moves and raps.

Representations of girlhood in Hip Hop shielded me from Eurocentric beauty standards and encouraged my self-esteem. This is not to say that I was not aware of these standards; I mean that women in Hip Hop provided a way of being that combatted the degradative messages the larger culture of the United States attempted to indoctrinate me with about my identity as a Black girl. My family and the culture of where I grew up made my racial and gendered experience significant ones and highlighted the ways that my experience was not the experiences of people who did not identify as a Black girl. Therefore, I learned early how our social locations and identities inform the way we experience the world. Women in Hip Hop and my family of origin showed me that my identity was political.

All of my images and messages around being a Black girl were heterosexual. In thinking about my sexual identity development, I honestly cannot recall getting any explicit messages that being queer was wrong or bad in some way, but I still felt as if I needed to hide that I liked girls. I remember in third grade, I wrote in my diary about wanting to kiss a girl in my class. I knew my mother would read my diary, because she had in the past. That diary entry was never mentioned. Similarly, in seventh grade I chatted in Yahoo chatrooms, pretending to be a boy and talking to other girls. Thinking back on this now, I think it was the only way my twelve-year-old

self could make sense of liking girls. I knew that it was okay for boys to like girls, so I pretended to be a boy online. I knew my mother read those chat messages too, but again she never said anything to me about them. It was not until years later when I was in high school that my mother talked to me about sexuality. She came into my room one day and told me that it was okay if I did not like boys “like that”. I had no idea what to say to her. I think that was the first time I had even considered that I did not have to like boys “like that” if I did not want to. I remember searching the internet for girls that liked girls “like that” and only seeing images of White queer women. So before going off to college, I decided that no matter what my mother had said, liking girls was just not something I could do.

However, while away at college, it became harder and harder to ignore my crushes and feelings for other girls. I do not think I ever “came out” in any public way. Instead, I talked openly about having crushes on women around my friends and family. In my junior year of college, “Don’t ask Don’t tell” - a 1993 law that forbid gay and lesbian folks from openly serving in the United States military was repealed. My conservative campus went into an uproar and for the first time that I can remember, I realized that my queerness was too political, being discussed and legislated by people who overwhelmingly did not identify as queer. Although I knew I never wanted to serve in the armed forces, I felt the need to respond to the anti-LGBT sentiments on my campus and wrote an op-ed article to the campus newspaper. Because there were few out queer students of color at my university, this article made an impact in the student of color circles I was a part of, and the budding LGBT groups on campus that were largely all white. Thinking back, had I never written that article, I may have never met other queer students of color on my campus. In many ways this article started my development as a community organizer, bringing people together who have similar experiences of marginalization.

As my queer community expanded, so too did my dating life. Although I have never been in a long-term relationship, I have had meaningful relationships that have shaped how I understand my queerness and the complexity of gender and sexuality. Every person that I have been in relation to has also been politically active in some way. The relationship that best serves as a metaphor for my political growth in relation to my romantic growth was my relationship with Brianna<sup>2</sup>. I met Brianna on Tumblr in the spring semester of 2012, right after the murder of Trayvon Martin. She and I had both been commenting on a thread and quickly began private messaging each other. We were attending universities not even an hour away from each other. She told me of her efforts to organize a “Hoodie march” at her school in which attendees would wear hoodies and demand justice for the slain 17-year-old. She and I talked about how she had been mistaken for a guy while wearing a hoodie and how Martin’s death terrified her too. Our conversations not only inspired me to similarly organize a “Hoodie march” on my campus, but also made me fall in love with Brianna. Later that semester we met up for the first time and officially started dating.

Brianna and I continued dating and following the developments of the Trayvon Martin case together. We both subscribed to text alerts for the case and in a way, bringing awareness to how Trayvon’s murder resonated with so many others united us as a couple. In July of 2013, I went to visit her and help her settle into her new apartment. On our way back to her apartment from dinner, it began to rain. We were totally unprepared and ran for cover at a local bus stop. Minutes later, both of our phones buzzed. A verdict was in for George Zimmerman - the man who had followed Trayvon, shot him, and killed him a little over a year prior. A flash of hope ran

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<sup>2</sup> All partners presented in this section are composite narratives of my relationships. The names have been changed to protect their identities.

across both of our faces and I could tell that we both thought in some small corner of our minds that he would be convicted of murdering Trayvon. Brianna opened the message before I could and read the verdict. Not guilty. I screamed in horror and collapsed into Brianna's arms. There we stood, the only people at the bus stop soaked from the rain and mourning. After I stopped crying, she and I talked about what it meant to love each other in a world that did not love us.

That moment of standing in the rain, being held by Brianna - a masculine presenting Black lesbian constantly mistaken for a guy - and mourning Trayvon plays in my mind often. Had she not been there to hold me and comfort me - and I her - I would have been alone at that bus stop. I see this loneliness as the very intimate experience of oppression. Days later three Black women - two of which identify as queer - started a hashtag turned movement, #BlackLivesMatter. Although the movement has done a lot since, those first days were all about pulling people out of their loneliness and uniting us through our collective grief. Thinking back on the lessons from my childhood, I believe this was uniquely possible because of the identities of queer Black women, moving and maintaining lives in and across various marginalized communities. Brianna and I ended our romantic relationship soon after but kept in close contact about movement work during my first experiences with campus activism in my first year of my doctoral program.

During my first year as a doctoral student I fell in love again, Bianca. She was a doctoral student too, and we encouraged each other's budding Black feminist praxis, joking that we were the future of Black feminism. In many ways our relationship shielded each of us from the racism, sexism, and homophobia in our departments that year. Our dates consisted of swapping June Jordan poems and licking wounds from the microaggressions of the week. Bianca's passions pulled her to education and music, while mine pulled me to campus activism and grassroots

organizing. At the beginning of our second year, a string of events on campus culminated in an 18-day sit-in of the administration building on campus. A united front of students and student organizations at our university aimed to hold the administration accountable for the policies and problems that unjustly impacted students of marginalized socio-economic class, disability, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and race experiences on campus.

Whenever I was not in class or seeing clients, I was strategizing, sharing articles, or providing food and sleeping materials to the students occupying the building overnight. Bianca and I went from sharing every available minute together to hardly seeing each other as my involvement with the sit in increased and she readied for a higher education conference. On the 4<sup>th</sup> night of the sit-in I was locked in with the other student activists and prevented from leaving the building by campus safety officers. It was the night before Bianca was to leave for her conference. I called her to explain that I was locked in the sit-in and I could hear her annoyance over the phone. We were sweet to one another, though, explaining that what each of us was doing was necessary for Black feminist futures. I ended up spending every night thereafter occupying the administration building with the other student activists. A week later when Bianca returned from her conference, I did not pick her up from the airport. Instead, I sent one of our mutual friends with a note, apologizing that there was too much to do at the sit-in. Six more days melted away and as we ended our occupation of the administration building, Bianca and I similarly ended our relationship. Although other dynamics influenced our breakup, our different approaches to ‘the struggle’ contributed too. I do not think I was able to balance showing up for Bianca intimately with showing up for the larger queer student of color community politically.

Two years after, fear that I never so consciously knew crept over me as I refreshed my phone for results of the presidential election on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. After it was official, I could

not move. I sat on my couch frozen in disbelief. There was no icy chill down my back like when I got news that my sorority sister Sandra Bland was found dead in police custody. There was no big breakdown like when the verdict of not guilty came back for Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2012. I did not even feel the fires of rage I felt following along on twitter the day Mike Brown lay on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri for 4 hours after being shot six times by an off-duty police officer. I was immobile and numb, sitting next to my partner at the time, Liz. Liz, a local nonbinary anti-racist Palestinian solidarity activist, was the first white person I had ever dated. Although neither of us said anything to each other in that moment of seeing the election results, I sensed that we both felt exposed and unsafe – both as individuals and as a couple.

Up until that moment, I had felt as if my personal fight for liberation in this country was feasible. In some bizarre way, each person-turned-hashtag over the past four years had made the enemies and the fight very clear to me. Having a slogan to rally behind and chant to myself to get through the day made isms feel conquerable. I was convinced through creating a social environment for myself in which my Black life was affirmed that finally, this country was on the verge of ending its love affair with white supremacy. I believed that most people were moderate to liberal and would never support a candidate who openly made misogynistic, racist, and Islamophobic comments. I was wrong. Liz's mom stopped by our apartment the next morning with breakfast for only herself and Liz. She gave me her "condolences" about the results of the election and quickly continued "but as a Christian homeowner, I had to vote for the candidate with my interest at heart". I realized two things in that moment: Liz's mom was racist and had voted for Trump; and that no matter how super radical my white partner was, they would always be a part of a larger white family that erased me. Liz and I fell in love with each other in radical political spaces. When I decided to end our relationship months later, I hoped that we could



continue that bond. Although we still keep in touch, both of us have fallen away from the Palestine solidarity group we met at.

Looking back, I believe I ended the relationship with Liz because everything felt so close for me, and everything felt so distant for them. In the first 12 weeks of 2015, 12 trans women of color were murdered – I mourned. On Father’s Day, a Syracuse Police Officer opened fire at a neighborhood barbecue killing Terry Maddox and injuring 3 others because she thought she saw a gun (Syracuse.com, 2016). I mourned again. Sandra Bland was my sorority sister who my chapter knew for being outspoken on social justice issues related to Black women. I have not been able to bring myself to watch the video of her arrest, but seeing her mugshot everywhere chilled me. Two days after her arrest for not signaling a lane change, she was found dead in her holding cell. Authorities stated she hung herself with a trash bag. I mourned again. Then in June of 2016, 50 queer and trans people of color were targeted and murdered in Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. One of the victims – Shane Tomlinson – was my mentor’s best friend. Yet again I was mourning and while Liz consoled me, they were not mourning. I felt envious of this distance from the grief. I could not handle that envy and it eventually ate away our intimacy.

With all of the inner strength I could muster, I dragged myself to local #BLM meetings, held healing spaces for people of color, and rallied for justice. I could not call in or take off from my responsibilities as a student, therapist, or an organizer. I felt an intergenerational grief, one that Black people in the United States have never been given the space to heal from. Somewhere in my fear and mourning I moved to action in ways that I never have before this last presidential election cycle. Prior to this, as a newcomer to grassroots organizing, I followed the lead of elders in the movement, participating in organizing rallies, boycotts, divestments, and protests. What I found in that model were people similarly being consumed by grief and depression, but too told

to continue on in the movement for liberation. Most organizers lovingly call movement work ‘the struggle’. There is no wellbeing lens to social justice when the climate of the movement is one that encourages ‘the struggle’. While I know this was supposed to be a term to represent the uphill battle we faced standing in opposition of the status quo, it took a form of its own inside the battle. I would go without eating, sleeping, or properly hydrating myself to help get a press release out or a protest organized. “The struggle” got real as I participated in the sit-in and post-election. I recall not sleeping several nights, staying up making sure that campus security officers did not harm students or to organize a healing space. Moreover, my love life had been a struggle in those times too. With this new awareness of the toll resistance work was taking on me, I resolved to bring healing to the struggle, both politically and for myself.

Although I had lost romantic ties, I was still in community with folks who I cared deeply about through the struggle. My comrades in the movement were the precise people I hoped to heal in deciding to become a therapist. Organizing rooms are packed with Black, queer, undocumented, poor, and/or disabled folks and their accomplices. Their grief had moved them to political action in the form of marches and sit ins. Mine had moved me to political action in the form of radically healing – first myself, then others with marginalized identities. By centering myself – a Black queer woman – I was creating a space that consciously resisted white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. The election results heightened my awareness of keeping myself and others whole, so I organized a series of healing workshops. I named it such intentionally, knowing that most Black folks in the community would not come to a group therapy session.

In my healing spaces, I incorporated clinical interventions with indigenous Afro-diasporic healing and wellness practices. These spaces were well attended and highlighted for

me that I was not the only one feeling the pain of oppression. They also allowed me to celebrate all of my identities simultaneously and still be in a therapist role. Additionally, the process of helping people who share my identities heal rekindled my light for social justice and for therapy. I experienced it as a break away from Black queer folks being denied healing, therefore seeing it as a privilege. For me this meant telling myself that I have the right to be okay, and so do folks in “the struggle”.

### *Theoretical Orientations*

#### **Black Feminist Thought.**

Incorporating Black feminism into my life has allowed me to put a name to the experiences I have had and ties me to a lineage of other women of color who have too shared these experiences and resisted oppression. Black feminism heavily influences my development as a person, and therefore is a guiding theoretical orientation of this study. It is easy to be swallowed up by the vast amount of literature produced by Black feminists, so I will explore only the tenets that most directly influence this study. I have found that the vocabulary of Black feminism has been incorporated into the field of Family Therapy, but Black feminism has not. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) speaks to how Black feminist thought has been disembodied from Black women as “situated knowers” (Haraway, 1988), filling the words they created with negative meanings - placing them on a “linguistic treadmill”. When I enact Black feminism, I re-embody it and legitimize my own experience as a situated knower, Black woman, and researcher. Through doing so I want to move feminism in Family therapy research to question the assumptions of our social world, not just the gendered ones. To best explain how Black feminism allows me to do so and informs the theoretical approach for this study, I will focus my

discussion of the theory on three main principles: simultaneity; empowerment as social justice; and radical change.

*Simultaneity.*

Feminist theory has been the leading theory in examining not only psychological factors, but gendered factors that influence individuals in relation to each other (Sharf R. S., 2008). Central to feminist theory is the idea that traditional ontological approaches do not account for the social context as a determiner of behavior and that sex roles inherently disadvantage individuals who do not identify as cisgender men (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Early feminist therapy literature mirrored notable feminist movements in the way that they marginalized women of color; mistaking unity for homogeneity (Lorde, 2007c). However, women of color – particularly Black women – have challenged hegemonic patriarchy, heterosexism, and white paternalism since the inception of feminist thought (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996).

Cultural competence literature in Family therapy added intersectionality and social justice to early Feminist Family therapy literature. Ken Hardy has been an influential family therapist scholar, writing on cultural competence training in Family Therapy programs. His early works focused on debunking the theoretical myth of sameness in family therapy, and challenging the field's inattentiveness to race, ethnicity, and gender (Hardy, 1989). More recently, he has published on cultural competence training strategies and social justice as it relates to family therapy (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2008). Falicov (1995) introduced a multidimensional framework to integrating culture into family therapy. Her framework aimed to move cultural competence beyond universalist, ethnicity-only, or particular approaches and into an intersectional position that recognized people's simultaneous membership in a multiplicity of cultural contexts (Falicov, 1995).

Brown (2009) added that this multidimensional framework must also include the therapist gaining an understanding of their own biases and intersections of identities. Dee Watts-Jones (2010) continued that location of self is a strategy systemic therapists can use to open dialogue about identity and intersectionality in therapy. Most recently, Addison and Coolhart's (2014) relational intersectional lens for working with queer couples introduced strategies for working with couples experiencing oppression due to any aspect of their identity. The authors shifted away from using unidimensional views of identity and outline an intersectional lens of identity, oppression, and power as complex and subjective (Addison & Coolhart, 2014). Addison and Coolhart (2014) stated that this provides the possibility for action against oppression collectively – social justice - and connection over shared experiences between the clients, therapist, and each other. Family therapy literature discusses social justice and intersectionality; both concepts find their roots in early writings by Black feminists.

The Combahee River Collective Statement is one of the earliest written feminist statements on exploring intersections of oppression. Members of the Combahee River Collective authored a statement in 1977 that discussed 'simultaneity' – which asserted that their lives as women were profoundly molded by the simultaneous experiences of sexuality, race, class, and ability (Collective, 1978). This statement was the result of the outrage of four women - Demita Frazier, Margo Okazawa-Rey, and twin sisters Beverly and Barbara Smith - appalled by the silence of both the feminist movements and Black rights movements after the murders of more than twelve Black women in Boston in the span of one year. The four women met to process their disillusionment with the civil rights, Black nationalism, and 1960's feminist movements – all of which in their opinion failed at developing an integrated analysis on class, race, sexual, and gender oppression (Collective, 1978). The four initially intended to raise social consciousness

among Black women with their statement. The statement ended up outlining the origin of contemporary Black Feminism in that it highlights how Black women have stood in opposition to white supremacy and male hegemony in both subtle and apparent ways. They continued that the work of these women has shed light on how sexual identities in combination with racial identities uniquely shape life experiences.

Only because of the particular conditions in which Black women in the United States of America have survived could a statement such as this and a theory such as Black feminism emerge. Alice Walker (1983) referred to these conditions as the “evil honey” that “exquisite butterflies” - her metaphor for Black women - were trapped in. While envisioning myself as an exquisite butterfly excites me, I understand through Black feminism that Black women’s experiences can provide the building blocks to free us all from the “evil honey”. Audre Lorde (1980) explained that the United States of America was established based on a “mythical norm” - defined as White, thin, male, heterosexual, christian, able, and financially secure. In order to maintain that mythical norm, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression as we know them became necessary evils for maintaining power (Lorde, 2007c). Those of us who stand outside of that norm in one way or another experience the trappings of the power that resides in that mythical identity.

The Combahee River Collective statement boldly proclaimed that the Black woman is the antithesis of this mythical norm and therefore all systems of oppression must be dismantled if Black women are to truly be free. Lorde (2007c) added to this that Black women must be seen as whole humans in all of their complexity, rather than a sum of oppressed parts. She states acknowledging differences among women replenishes all women with energy and creative insight into dismantling oppression (2007a). It would also allow us to reject the Black as

oppressed/White as privileged binary that is created through the mythical norm, making space for all people - across race, class, and gender. Lorde revisited this thought in “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”, adding that our differences provide us clarity into unity. In perhaps one of her most famous quotes, she echoes this: “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained, nor are any of you” (Lorde, 1981).

Black feminism asserts that while our oppressions are inextricably tied to one another, so too is our liberation. Years after the Combahee River Collective introduced “simultaneity”, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced intersectionality to Black feminist theory. Crenshaw described intersectionality as simultaneity on a systemic level. Intersectionality refers to the ways in which oppressive institutions such as racism and classism are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another (Crenshaw, 1991). I view simultaneity as the mother that birthed intersectionality. Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality directly relates to my exploration of the experiences of QWOC maintaining relationships while engaged in struggles for liberation because these movements aim to make systemic level change. Simultaneity similarly undergirds this research in the way that each participant’s experiences will be shaped by the experiences of all of their identities, the relationship between their identities and their partners, and the relationship between their identities and my own.

*Empowerment as social justice.*

Black feminism legitimizes the experiences of marginalized people and honors ways they have indigenously produced knowledge such as music, creating, and story (Kovach, 2009). Collins (2000) explained that in centering the experiences of African American women, Black feminism seeks to empower Black women living within social injustice and too empowers others

by struggling in solidarity with others experiencing oppression. Collins (2000) contended that knowledge is what fosters empowerment for Black women. I similarly understand empowerment as happening through knowledge, not just through didactically being taught facts, but also through having new experiences. I view empowerment as an ideal to strive towards, recognizing how the material conditions of a socially unjust society stifles empowerment for all marginalized groups, not just Black women. Collins (2000) pointed out here that in such a society, marginalized groups can gain power situationally, but in doing so disempower other groups. This is not the empowerment I take from Black feminism and hold as an ideal. Instead, through accessing knowledge and feeling empowered through doing so, I draw from Black feminist authors and conclude that Black feminism urges us to fully center our own experiences - no matter our social location - in order to make visible the areas in which we may build coalitions with others. Through centering my experience as a Black lesbian woman, I am able to see just how many communities I am apart of and whose liberation is bound to mine. Collins (2000) said that this realization fosters empowerment personally, but also fosters the conditions of social justice. Coalition building is a core premise of grassroots organizing and political activism. Therefore, I believe many QWOC organizing with current movements for social justice will have experiences with empowerment and coalition building.

### *Radical Change.*

In “Poetry is Not a Luxury” Lorde (2007b) stated “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free”. It is this quote that I always return to in conceptualizing how Black feminism thinks of change. Firstly, Lorde’s words highlight the ways in which change is an intergenerational process through her evocation of parents. Black feminism holds that we learn



ways of resisting from those who have lived before us in similar contexts, but “historical amnesia” of the dominant context often limits access to knowing these ways (Lorde, 2007b). However, resistance is not the end goal of Black feminism. Black feminism seeks to eliminate intersecting oppressions that disempower - an existence referred to as social justice (Collins, 2000). In a socially just society without intersecting oppressions, stories of survival can flourish and not be silenced by historical amnesia.

Secondly, Lorde’s words underscore how Black feminism conceptualizes change as an internal and external transformation. That internal voice whispering of freedom is the internal voice I aim to amplify through this exploration, as it is untouched by interconnected oppressions. Amplifying that voice alters the structures of oppression we internalize as a result of living in a socially unjust world. Doing so fosters activism in the form of self-definition and frees us up to think of ourselves as connected to others who are too living in a socially unjust world. I think of romantic relationships as the easiest connections for us to name these self-definition dynamics as they are voluntary relationships. Therefore, revolutionary change is not merely resisting oppression, but externalizing what Lorde (2007b) called the “piece of the oppressor” that we internalize while living in an oppressive society. This change transforms us personally, but also transforms society as we reject blueprints of oppression. I see this as political change that QWOC enact simply by being in relation to one another, resisting cisheteropatriarchy and racism.

In my role as a Black feminist researcher working to amplify the freedom voice, I too am struggling to externalize the piece of the oppressor. I am struggling to externalize it from within myself and also from projecting onto participants. I see myself doing so by not suspending feminism when it feels uncomfortable, but instead being a feminist everywhere (Dhillon, 2017).

Many who know me have heard me say that I cannot “turn it (my feminism) off”. This means that as a researcher, I am always aware of which women of color can participate in my study given that I only fluently speak and understand one language - English. Further, this means attending to what the terms “woman” and “person of color” connote and using what power I have as researcher to be inclusive of women across gendered experiences and racially oppressed groups. I also see this study as a challenge to myself to explore conversations of QWOC love and resilience that are often silenced in larger societal contexts. Having these conversations challenge hegemonic systems of oppression intimately and politically.

### **Narrative therapy theoretical influences.**

Narrative theory is rooted in the assumption that stories are a basic human strategy for processing fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, what happened, and change. Narrative therapy theory is the postmodern relational approach to family therapy which holds the same, asserting that knowledge is constructed through the way we make meanings of our experiences. I am proposing to conduct semi-structured dyadic interviews and will use narrative techniques, as defined by White and Epston (1990), to conduct these interviews. While the interviews conducted for this project will not have the intended goal of being therapeutic, the core tenets of narrative therapy are central to the way in which I think of myself operating as a researcher. I see interviews as participants trusting me with their stories.

Narrative therapy asserts that story is the way in which we know things about ourselves and is therefore a method (White & Epston, 1990). This is also echoed by indigenous feminist scholar Margaret Kovach who stated that stories are not only knowing, but they situate us in relation to our world and our world in relation to us (Kovach, 2009). Story is not apolitical or acultural and the cultural epistemology of a community must be understood in order to

understand the story (Kovach, 2009). As a qualitative researcher, I must also be aware of how story is rooted in a relationship-based approach (White & Epston, 1990). For a story to surface there must be trust between the participants and myself, which is not only built through my interview techniques, but is also deeply personal and layered by my own experience as a single queer woman of color engaged in political activism and how my participants relate to me. From the questions I pose in interviews to data analysis, narrative therapy theory serves as an organizing and guiding theory for me; therefore, I will outline the theory in hopes of making its application here transparent. Specifically, I will discuss how narrative's tenets of power and language inform my theoretical orientation.

*Power.*

Developed in the 1980's, leading theorists Michael White and David Epston constructed the theory in a time where the debate on power in Family Therapy literature pushed by feminist scholars like Marianne Walters and Betty Carter (Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988) left the field at an impasse. Feminist scholars were arguing that power exists and that some use their power in oppressive ways over others (Walters et al., 1988). Others argued against them that power does not really exist, that it is constructed by bringing it forth through language (White & Epston, 1990). White and Epston move the field past this impasse through rooting Narrative therapy in Foucault's argument that we predominantly experience the constitutive effects of power through "truths" that shape our relationships. In this way "truths" are not objective fact, but ideas that get normalized as knowledge (White & Epston, 1990). Therefore, a core tenet of Narrative therapy is that our realities are constructed through truths that become normalized, and these truths are shaped through the language we used to describe them (White & Epston, 1990).

This differed from the way power as only oppressive was being discussed in Family therapy at that time.

White and Epston also reframed the oppressive impact power can have as subjugative, excluding some from knowledges that are accepted as truths in communities - both globally and locally (White & Epston, 1990). White highlighted this exclusion from knowledge as the problem, externalizing problems from people who experience them. White and Epston (1990) stated that people begin to experience problems when their lived experiences do not align with the stories of their lives as they - or often as others - have constructed them. In Narrative therapy theory, our identity comes from the stories we tell about ourselves - we are the stories. Another core tenet of Narrative therapy is these stories can be changed through challenging the metaphor - the problematic story that people tell themselves about experiences - and creating new meaning (White & Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy is concerned with how people organize their lives around the meaning of these metaphors. The theorists referred to this as the “survival” of the problematic story and explore ways in which the problem gains influence over people. The narrative therapist is concerned with what is required for the metaphor to survive and challenging its survival tactics in order to create change (White & Epston, 1990).

Following these tenets, the role of the Narrative therapist is to be a collaborator and ‘fellow traveler’ through the stories of clients’ lives (Walsh & Keenan, 1998). I see my role as a narrative researcher similarly, not leaning into the power of sitting in the seat of “researcher” evaluating the “researched” by acting as expert. Instead, I invited participants to reveal their expert selves (Walsh & Keenan, 1998), as only they are the expert of their experiences. White and Epston (1990) stated that in order to do this effectively, you must truly believe that people are experts of their own experiences and they know best the stories of their lives. The only

expert stance Narrative therapists employ is being experts at asking questions. Walsh and Keenan (1998) described this in a way that I most identify with, stating that Narrative therapists must master asking questions that help people access their expert knowledge of the problem saturated stories, the things that are keeping this story alive, and things that help them gain influence over the story - unique outcomes. I intended to adopt this same stance as a narrative researcher.

### *Language.*

In discussing knowing, Narrative therapy theory follows other postmodern approaches through critically examining the role of language in knowing (Anderson, 1999). What we know, how we come to know it, and how knowledge is created to begin with is influenced by language. Freedman and Combs (1996) added that the way we talk about issues and the words we choose to talk about them with actually limit what we know and how we can know it. They continued that the language we use become metaphors that influence what we look, feel, and listen for in life. Narrative therapy moves away from the idea that words have fixed meanings that when placed together represent reality. Anderson (1999) said that Narrative therapy does so in order move away from thinking of words as universal descriptors and to instead explore the meanings that words have across persons.

I take from this that I cannot expect others to share my definitions of words and what certain words bring to mind for me. Instead participants and I must work together to agree on what words most closely represent their experience, realizing that words may never fully represent an experience. This also means that during interviews, I was inquisitive about what words mean for participants and why they chose to use the language they did to narrate their experience. Asking questions around this makes room for participants to describe things in their

experiences they may have overlooked and also attempts to dismantle the researcher-expert/participant-non expert dichotomy that is assumed in the extractive nature of research. Narrative therapy holds that my identity is central to how I interpret and collect stories because I have my own inward knowing about what I am hearing. Therefore, not only are the identities of the participants central to this project, my identity is also central to the research.

Narrative approaches are also collaborative and non-pathologizing approaches that center people as the experts of their own lives and consider their lives in broader dimensions of identity including race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, and citizenship. In the narrative therapy context, stories emerge in their context as certain events are selected over others to represent truths (White & Epston, 1990). As stories take shape and are retold, they invite the teller to select certain information to represent the truths that they wish it to be retold. As a narrative therapist researcher, I used conversations as opportunities to listen for clues to knowledges themes that may begin to outline a theory about the experiences of QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in political activism. I see this narrative approach as paralleling Charmaz's grounded theory strategies.

### **Grounded Theory.**

Social psychologist Lisa Bowleg's (2008) scholarship was the first application of Black feminism to research I discovered. As such, it informs my attempts to integrate Black Feminism into Marriage and Family Therapy grounded theory research. Namely, I have applied the challenges to qualitative research using an intersectional framework she outlined. First, Bowleg (2008) asserted that interpretation is the most substantial tool in the intersectionality researcher's toolkit and begins with how one views stigmatized identities. I have taken this principle to apply to my role as researcher, understanding that my interpretation of participants' experiences is

based on my unique experiences with privilege and oppression. These personal experiences inform my biases and also what I paid attention to when analyzing interviews. Additionally, while I was “seeing” participants, they were also “seeing” me through their own experiences, thus impacting the parts of their experiences they chose to share with me. I often made this “seeing” of one another verbal, deconstructing how we viewed each other’s identities.

Secondly, Bowleg (2008) warned against additive approaches to identity. Additive approaches would approach people as if each marginalized social identity they have increased their experiences of social inequality and discrimination. Bowleg stated that seeing their experiences this way conceptualizes experiences of oppression as based on separate identities and summative (Bowleg, 2008). This is not intersectional, as viewing oppression intersectionally shows that each of our group identities inform the other, and thus inform how we experience privilege and oppression (Bowleg, 2008). Our experiences of race are gendered, our experiences of class are raced, and so on. Lastly, Bowleg (2008) outlined three suggestions for intersectional researchers that I have implemented as a Black feminist researcher: not asking additive questions; allowing participants to tell the stories of their identities as a whole; and construct questions around experiences – not demographics (Bowleg, 2008). For example, question 3 from the interview schedule<sup>3</sup> is: *How did you come to be involved in political movements?* This question does not assume that their identities called them to political movements, but leaves room for participants to discuss their racialized, gendered, and sexual experiences.

Grounded theory explains phenomena by developing a theory grounded in collected data as opposed to deducing measurable hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) stated that grounded theory methods are flexible guidelines that allow

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix D

researchers to collect and analyze data into a theory induced from the data. She described theory as a byproduct of systematically collecting thick descriptions and richly interpreting them through coding – attaching labels to segments of data that most accurately depict what that segment is about (Charmaz, 2014). Instead of aiming to be generalizable, grounded theory aims to provide a situated explanation of the context participants describe. Charmaz (2014) described eight main strategies to conducting grounded theory research. The first strategy is to analyze data early and often. Charmaz (2014) stated that many methods can be used to obtain data such as focus groups or interviews, and researchers should transcribe these sessions and code them early. The second strategy is analyzing as data collection takes place in order to include the process of the interviews as well, not just their content. Thirdly, Charmaz advised using comparative methods to ensure that early codes are continuing as new transcripts are coded.

The fourth strategy for grounded theory researchers is to stay close to the data, drawing on narratives from participants for developing theoretical concepts. Fifthly, more abstract theoretical concepts should be developed through systemically analyzing the codes. Charmaz (2014) suggested reading and listening to interviews several times to become familiar with them and to find a general organization that most of them could best fall into. The sixth strategy of grounded theory is emphasizing the new theory that is emerging as opposed to applying existing theories. Charmaz (2014) stated that this is best done through richly describing how the open, axial, and selective codes developed across transcripts. The seventh strategy relates to sampling theoretically and purposely to collect the thickest description possible for the emerging theory. The eighth strategy outlined by Charmaz (2014) follows, encouraging grounded theory researchers to pay attention to variations in their data and finding participants that can directly speak to those variations. Lastly, Charmaz (2014) urged grounded theory researchers to develop



a category with their data, rather than attempting to explore a topic that has previously been supported by research (Charmaz, 2014).

### *Data collection*

I conducted six (6) semi-structured dyadic interviews with QWOC couples. I chose to conduct dyadic interviews because I was interested in the couple relationship. As opposed to having one partner report on the relationship experience like in past studies on activist couples, I wanted to hear their shared narrative of their experiences. While dyadic interviews were challenging, given that one partner might dominate the interview, I was confident that I could pull the other partner in through directly asking them to respond or other interview techniques, which I did. To be included in the study, both partners had to be over the age of 18, identify with a racially marginalized group within the United States, and also be active in grassroots political organizing related to social justice and liberation. Movements they are involved in must have explicit radical political principles and contemporary responses to the current administration of the United States in order to participate. Participants were sampled using nonrandom theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). The semi-structured interview explored how QWOC partners became involved in political activism, the impact movement work has had on their relationship, and the impact their relationship has on their activism. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix D. I recruited participants through political organizing meetings, LGBT people of color listservs, and online communities for QWOC.

While recruiting at political organizing meetings, I invited potential participation verbally and gave those who were interested my contact information. While recruiting virtually, I used flyers with my contact information on them. Via listservs, my email address was used as the reply address. I was also aware of participants that fit the inclusion criteria and invited them to

participate via direct messaging. Because I am a member of the community I was sampling, my boundaries around who was appropriate to interview for my project were continually shifting and solidifying. Ultimately, I decided to not include any former sexual or romantic partners in this project. Although many of my exes fit the inclusion criteria, having the added pressure to participate because of being intimately connected to me is a complexity that I felt uncomfortable with. As I navigated the sampling process, I consulted with my advisor about other participants that I had questions about in regard to closeness to me. I audiotaped, transcribed and coded the interviews. Audiotaping was done using MP3 digital recording devices and the audio files were transferred to an encrypted external hard drive immediately following each interview.

If participants were located in the Syracuse area I invited them to take place in my office, which is accessible by local public transportation and by car. The building is also fully wheelchair accessible. None of the couples did so, but it was offered. Local participants were also given the choice to participate in the interview in a place that felt convenient for them and where they felt most comfortable (i.e., their home, a library, a coffee shop). I interviewed one couple in such a place, a community garden space the two co-cultivated. Participants that were not located in the Syracuse area or for whom meeting in person was not preferred, interviews took place via Skype and Zoom – video conferencing platforms, so space was not a concern in these cases. Interviews were deidentified as I transcribed them. The audiotaped interviews and deidentified transcribed interviews were kept on an encrypted password protected external hard drive. The external hard drive was stored in my locker in the doctoral student room, accessible only by swipe-card access and a key. The list that links participants' names to their deidentified transcripts was only accessible to me and my faculty advisor.

### *Data analysis.*

Data analysis began as soon as the transcription was complete. Following grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014), data was analyzed in four phases: initial, open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, I examined the transcripts line-by-line, sticking closely to the data, to reflect meaning in the text. Axial codes are more conceptual, addressing the most significant codes from the previous steps. Axial coding relates to categories and subcategories, specifying dimensions of categories. I identified these categories from the data by noticing which line by line codes repeated or were echoed across and within transcripts and reviewing my notes in my dissertation diary. Finally, selective coding involved specifying relationships between categories previously developed. I achieved this by linking the categories I identified into a cohesive narrative of the 6 couples I interviewed, a narrative I named “Revolutionships”. Phases of coding were not linear, allowing me to interact with data as a theory of Revolutionships emerged (Charmaz, 2014).

### *Trustworthiness and Credibility.*

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, Yardley’s (2000) four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research was used. The first principle of sensitivity to context was addressed by the theoretical design and continued using prolonged engagement with participants and verbatim excerpts from participants to support themes. The second principle, commitment and rigor, I demonstrated by recruitment, attending to participants during interviews, and their sense of safety. The third principle, transparency, was achieved by clear description of methods and reporting the emergent themes in manuscripts. The final principle is impact and importance, detailed above. To address transparency, sensitivity to context, and rigor, I adopted a few qualitative research strategies and tools.

Firstly, I am writing and reflecting often and kept a diary of this research process. I call this diary my “dissertation dump diary”. I say call instead of called because even as I write this, I am still adding reflections on this process to this diary. Through keeping a diary, I am aiming to be as transparent as possible with how each step of this process unfolds and my self-of-the-researcher process as well. To date I have written entries about the frustration of finding inclusive language for sexualities, reflections on the couples I interviewed, struggles to identify categories from the overwhelming amount of data I collected, and reactions to sociopolitical events. I also see this journal as a way of keeping informal analytic notes, recording my journey from interviews, to codes, to constructing a theory. Charmaz (2014) calls this process memo-writing and highlights how important this writing is when we move to the conceptual phase of grounded theory. Charmaz continued that slowing to write the where, whens, and whys limits the impulse to instantly theorize and keeps us in the analysis (2014, p 43). I already know that I am someone who has to slow myself, so this journal kept me in the analysis as well. I am using this diary as a form of an audit trail for my work as well. Qualitative researchers use audit trails as a strategy to richly describe steps taken in the research process – adding to transparency (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006).

Being a queer woman of color engaged in political movements myself, I anticipated that some – if not all – of the couples I interviewed may know me in some other capacity. To support trustworthiness in my study, I did not interview past partners and used my meetings with my advisor as a form of triangulation-by-observer (Lietz et al., 2006). Additionally, I used my dissertation diary and meetings with my faculty advisor as sources of transparent reflexivity. Reflexivity, as described by Charmaz (2014, pg. 13) shreds the notion of objectivity and views research as constructed by the researcher’s values that shape what they see. I interpret this as me

being who I am informing every aspect of my study, from who participates, to the themes I construct. By meeting regularly with my advisor, who is not a queer woman of color, and journaling about my own reactions to my project, I was constantly examining and reflecting on my relationship to the data and checking myself.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Revolutionships

I care for you  
 I care for our world  
 if I stop  
 caring about one  
 it would be only  
 a matter of time  
 before I stop  
 loving  
 the other.

– *Pat Parker* (2017)

After months of coding, journaling about coding, finding categories, and stuckness, a friend sent me the poem “Love Isn’t” by Pat Parker - a Black lesbian feminist poet. After reading it I found myself writing again, my components clearer than they had ever been. The quote at the beginning of this chapter is from that poem and captures the spirit of the QWOC activist couples I interviewed for this project. I realized that my process of coding outlined two main themes: the experiences of queer women of color activist couples – an experience I named “Revolutionships” – and what relational therapists should know when working with them. In the first section of this chapter, I will introduce you to the six couples I interviewed for this project. In the second section, I will retell their experiences maintaining relationships while engaged in political movements through detailing the emergent themes from the six interviews I conducted – highlighting the four most salient components of Revolutionships. Lastly in this chapter, I will summarize and outline the concepts that they named as helpful for couple’s therapists to know

when working with them. As there have been no dyadic qualitative explorations of the experiences of QWOC activist couples or any articulation of a model for working with them in couples therapy, I aim to begin that work with this chapter.

### *The Participants*

My nerves were all over the place before I started each interview, especially my first. Before my first interview, I wrote in my dissertation journal about fearing my interview questions weren't good enough. What if the couples I interview don't take me serious as a researcher? As an activist? As a lesbian? As all three? I also wrote about deciding what to wear for my interviews and somehow decided that a "uniform" for each interview would be best, so I wore the same outfit for each interview – a sweatshirt that read "Pirate Wrestling" and black jeans. Looking back, I could tell this was just my nerves, but in the moment it felt like an easy way to not be the organizer, student activist, or therapist the participants may have known me as. I could just be a listener and witness to their stories. Clearly my own anxieties about doing this project were informing my fear of starting the interviews. Thankfully, after my first experience interviewing a couple for this project, many of these worries melted away. This section is an introduction to each of the couples I interviewed.

Before starting each interview, the couples completed individual self-report fill-in-the-blank demographic forms (see Appendix B) and also discussed the parts of their identities that they thought it important for me to know before interviewing them. This was a brief conversation – but felt important to me as I wanted them to not only fill out yet another demographic form, but to use their own language and labels to describe themselves. As I discuss each couple in this section, I will use the language and labels they used to self-define and identify. After the

demographic information, I then read the oral consent form<sup>4</sup> to the couples I interviewed via Skype, and for the couple interviewed in person, they were given time to read and sign the consent form. I emailed everyone a copy of the consent form before starting the interview.

Each interview was about an hour and fifteen minutes long. The interviews were guided by the questions I had on my interview schedule, but as they progressed, I became curious about things I did not consider before starting. Firstly, two of the couples I interviewed were raising children, so I asked about ways in which being parents impacted their political work and relationships. Also, I noticed that we – the couples and myself – would talk in “struggle slang” – or the language of organizers. One of them would say ‘Flint’, ‘Standing Rock’, or ‘Ferguson’ and I would immediately know what these words were and the injustice they were resisting. However, in remembering I would have to retell these experiences to folks who may not be aware of the struggles for liberation, I found myself asking more questions about what they meant by these terms. Similarly, I asked more questions around difficulties that are apparent to folks who organize around these things and who are queer, for clarity so that those who are not involved or not queer will understand these experiences – such as “coopting<sup>5</sup>” and “queer family<sup>6</sup>”.

### *The College Sweethearts*

Ashley and Summer<sup>7</sup> heard about my dissertation project from a mutual friend we all had experiences organizing with. Summer emailed me and shared that our mutual friend told her I

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix A

<sup>5</sup> Coopting refers to experience of diverting language or a movement, or using it in a way that is different from – and often counter to – its intended or original one

<sup>6</sup> Synonym for chosen family or fictive kin

<sup>7</sup> I have changed the names of the folks I interviewed to protect their confidentiality. Many of them selected their own pseudonyms. I have also deidentified their locations and universities to the best of my ability without losing the profoundness and impact of their work.



was organizing on campus and in the Syracuse community, and knowing the work our friend was involved with, she trusted me. The worries of being taken seriously as an activist melted slightly as I realized I am a part of a radical QWOC community – one that I would soon find out was small and tight knit. Summer, a 26-year-old Native American femme who grew up on a reservation in South Dakota, informed me that she and her partner Ashley – a 26-year-old nonbinary Taiwanese American – were both interested in sharing the stories of their relationship with me for my project. Before starting the interview, the three of us talked about our mutual friends and compared rallies we attended and probably crossed paths at. We laughed and made jokes about my “Pirate Wrestling” sweater. We showed each other our pets – them a dog and me a cat. After my nerves calmed, I began the interview.

Summer and Ashley met each other in college six years ago on a spring break service trip. They both volunteered to help homeless families in a major city on the east coast of the United States. The two became fast friends after realizing they both wanted to do more than volunteer to help the homelessness in that community. Summer shared that she had been out for a long time but was unsure if Ashley was queer when she started to have feelings for her. When Ashley shared that she had a crush on one of Summer’s friends – a straight girl – Summer took the opportunity to tell Ashley how she felt about her. The two started dating soon after and have been together ever since – 5 years now. This is why I nicknamed them the “College Sweethearts”.

Summer and Ashley are still located on the east coast and together have participated in a broad range of activist efforts, everything from protesting at Standing Rock in 2016 to organizing Asian and Native alums of their undergraduate institution to pressure their university to expand its ethnic studies department. Summer works as the director of a community nonprofit

supporting those impacted by homelessness and Ashley is a doctoral student in education. They described themselves as an intercultural couple, and the two are just that – blending their two social locations into a union. Summer practices a Lakota religion and describes her gender as winkte<sup>8</sup>. Ashley is second generation American, Buddhist, nonbinary, and queer. As I interviewed them, I noticed how much they looked at each other, checking in to see if the other was okay. I scribbled notes in the margins of my paper about their touches – a hand on a knee or a rub on the back when one of them was talking about something particularly difficult to retell. They both talked about “queer” being the closest English translations for gender identities in their first languages and appreciated my use of the word. Summer said it is the only word she feels that has not been whitewashed. We then talked about being white passing<sup>9</sup>, as Summer described herself as such, but Ashley and I agreed that we did not read her as such. The three of us agreed that regardless of how we are read by others, identifying as a woman of color is a political choice, one that put us all in community with each other. Ashley stated that calling herself a woman of color means she cares about issues that impact Summer and other racialized women too.

### *The First-Generation Gems*

Qamar and Alvita had both been following my Tumblr page for queer women of color for a while, and when Qamar saw my post about my dissertation project, they reached out to express interest in participating. Qamar emailed me to schedule the interview, and we were both so excited to talk about the Tumblr page that I ended up interviewing them that same day. I got the sense that Alvita was not as excited about the interview, so I specifically attended to her during

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<sup>8</sup> Winkte is the Lakota-specific word for two-spirit, the pan-Indigenous term used by some Native Americans to describe people who are queer.

<sup>9</sup> A person of color that is perceived as White

the consent conversation. I wanted to make sure that she truly wanted to participate and did not feel encouraged to do so because of Qamar's excitement. She assured me that she wanted to participate after reading more about the purpose of my dissertation project.

Alvita, a 28-year-old spiritual queer black woman, and Qamar, a 26-year-old queer Muslim biracial person, are both first generation Americans on one side of their families. The experiences that they shared with me throughout their interview spoke so much to this aspect of their identity led me to nickname them 'The First-Generation Gems'. Alvita's father is from Jamaica, her mother a "firecracker Black American woman". Qamar's mother is white American, and their father is Black, from Algeria. One of the experiences they shared that resonated with me was their commiseration over both having grandmothers who voted for Donald Trump – Qamar's white grandmother who lives in poverty and Alvita's conservative Jamaican grandmother who had just gained citizenship. More than any of the other couples I interviewed, Alvita and Qamar talked about the contradictions of their family lives and being radical activists. They are both college graduates and Qamar was finishing a master's degree in education when I interviewed them.

Qamar and Alvita seemed so much more than a couple to me as I interviewed them. As they talked about working together to find ways to disrupt the status quo while also preserving their own wellbeing, their political partnership was so apparent. Friends who were organizing for two years together, the two had been in an intimate relationship for six months at the time of my interview with them. They met as coworkers at the organization they both work at – an organization committed to finding housing for women. They both think deeply about not only being affectionate but supporting each other in the world as revolutionary within itself. Both assigned female at birth, they have been exploring their gender identities. Alvita shared she

mainly identified with womanhood, using she/her pronouns and Qamar identifies as ‘woman and’, using they/them pronouns. Currently they are both working and organizing through an organization in the nation’s capital to support women dealing with homelessness, so their genders are often a conversation in their work.

### *The Scholar Activists*

The third couple I interviewed was Cassidy and Devyn. I was so excited when Devyn reached out to me on my Instagram page after I posted my recruitment flyer. She sent me a private message saying that she and her partner would love to participate. Since both of my first couples were East Coast organizers in large metropolitan cities, I was elated to interview Devyn and her partner Cassidy, based in a small town in North Carolina. At the time of our conversation, Devyn was finishing up her bachelors degree and getting ready to start graduate school. She is a 21-year-old African American and Vietnamese femme who described her sexuality as sexually fluid. Cassidy was finishing her master’s degree at the same university Devyn was attending, and had been accepted to a doctoral program at the institution as well. She is a southern Black biracial 25-year-old woman who identifies as pansexual. Throughout our conversation, she also shared that her religious community and identity as a Progressive National Baptist was an integral part of her identity as well. They had been together for almost a year when I interviewed them.

Cassidy and Devyn were both actively involved in continuing the Freedom Schools – started by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s – for the children in their community each summer. They were both passionate about political education, but were clear that the way each of them approached this was very different. Cassidy used sermons and Hip Hop while Devyn leaned into organizing student movements and community

members. Although they shared this activist space together currently, the two met on a trip to Washington, D.C., attending a rally in support of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign two years prior. Cassidy explained that she was the site coordinator for the Freedom School program in their area and when she recognized Devyn's name, hired her immediately. Both coming out of serious relationships at the time, they were friends for a year, then started dating.

As the first couple organizing in the South, Devyn and Cassidy shared specific challenges they faced being hypervisible as a QWOC couple, being that there are not many in their community. They also talked about what activism looks like for them as academics in the South. Two things stuck with me after their interview. The first was how caring and affectionate they were to each other, kissing each other's shoulders and holding one another while they answered my questions. At times I found myself saying "aww" at their displays of affection for one another. The second thing that stuck with me after their interview was just how interconnected their scholarship and academic endeavors were with their activism. They were organizing around political education and organizing literacies while producing scholarship at the same time – truly living in the legacies of SNCC members from the 60s.

### *The Clergy Mommas*

Couples reaching out to me had slowed for a while, so I started googling different combinations of "queer women of color couples" and came across a very recent article written by two Black clergy women who were raising their daughter using revolutionary feminist values. The coauthors of the article were Kelindria and Imani, two Christian ministers who were actively organizing with #BlackLivesMatter and The Poor People's Campaign in a large city on the East Coast. I quickly found myself in a wormhole researching the two of them – who had been together for 5 years, and married for 4. I decided to reach out to Kelindria on Facebook, and

moments later she responded wanting to know more about my dissertation project. After sending her the recruitment flyer and explaining what I was doing, she gave me Imani's contact to share and invite her to participate as well. They both happily agreed and seemed as excited about my project as I was.

Imani described herself as a 36-year-old Black cisgender woman, wife, and "other mother" – in that order. Then she shared that her position and identity as a Christian minister would follow. Kelindria, 37, similarly described her identities in a particular order, noting that she is a Black woman first, then a spouse, a mother, religious professional, and a queer person. After being tagged in posts together by mutual friends on Facebook in 2013, the two began private messaging each other, and eventually started a long-distance relationship – with Imani living on the east coast and Kelindria in Seminary school living in the Midwest with her daughter. After the death of Mike Brown in 2014, the two found themselves traveling to Ferguson frequently, then to visit each other for solace. Eventually Kelindria decided to move her daughter and her activism to the east coast and the two married and relocated to a city nearby where Imani was living.

Kelindria and Imani were the first couple I interviewed that were parenting, and this seemed to animate and inform every aspect of their activism – from organizing support for mothers who lost children to police violence to helping undocumented parents who were separated from their children. They both talked about mothering as revolutionary and as an act of defiance within itself when everything in their lived conditions was working against their survival. They not only talked about mothering their daughter as instilling hope that they can do things to make the world different for her, but also as pushing their politics – forcing them to pivot away from exists to imagining what is possible. Their framing of their activism in this way

made me think about how necessary it is to have mothers in movement spaces. As we talked throughout the interview the two of them agreed, and hoped that more movement spaces would become “mother friendly”. They continued that it is important for children to be in these spaces too – seeing their mothers as more than care takers, and in their case ministers, but as politically active change makers.

### *The Long Distance Liberators*

Long distance relationships seem hard enough to sustain, never mind trying to organize in local movements while maintaining a long distance love. Somehow for the past two years, that is exactly what Raven and Alex have been doing. Raven reached out to me after hearing me talk about my dissertation on a podcast that I cohost with my best friend – QueerWOC the Podcast. She shared that she has been a long time listener and would be more than happy to have me interview her and her partner. At first this made me so nervous, because I am open about my own dating life on my podcast, and wondered what Raven knowing these things might mean for her sharing personal information about her relationship with me. After we talked to arrange a time for the interview this nervousness dissipated, as she shared with me that my openness on the podcast is what made her and Alex feel safe enough to tell me about their relationship.

Alex and Raven met in college on the track and field team. A year older than Alex, Raven was already out on campus as queer and actively involved in maintaining a queer group on campus for students of color. The two were teammates and friends and grew closer over events on campus that led them to organize against racism and homophobia together until the day before Raven’s graduation, when they expressed their feelings for one another and started their relationship. The two have been a bicoastal couple ever since, with Raven working food justice and housing in a large New England city and Alex organizing Black ride shares and other

material supports to reduce the impact of voter suppression in California. Raven describes herself as a loosely Christian 23-year-old cis Black woman radical who has navigated and worked in poverty for most of her life. She identifies as queer and is a college graduate. Alex is a 22-year-old cis<sup>10</sup> Black woman who had recently graduated with her degree in political science at the time of our interview. She identifies as a lesbian and shared that being a student athlete informed her activism just as much as being a member of the queer community did.

What stood out the most to me while interviewing Alex and Raven was how much they communicated nonverbally with each other. It was early in the morning when I interviewed them, and the two had been up preparing breakfast together. For the duration of the interview, they fed each other and pointed to foods that the other hadn't touched in a while. Raven stated that somewhere in their relationship they decided that communication was important, and so they work hard at it in all forms. At times, Alex would respond to Raven with nothing more than a facial expression and Raven would obviously know what she meant. The intentionality around their communication was apparent. What I also noticed in interviewing Raven and Alex was how ridiculous I was for attempting to separate movements, as they are all so connected in the lives of QWOC. Alex and Raven were so different from each other, yet attacking the same struggles from different points. They talked about being "directly impacted", even when an injustice seemingly did not affect them, which I too resonate with.

### *The Choose Yous*

I first heard about Kenya and Niecy through a mutual friend who told me about the biannual trips the two of them organized to take a U-Haul full of water to Flint, Michigan<sup>11</sup> from

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<sup>10</sup> Cisgender, meaning the sex she was assigned at birth is the sex/gender with which she identifies

<sup>11</sup> Flint, Michigan has been in a water crisis since April of 2014. The city's Mayor okayed a cheaper piping to a new water source – switching it from Lake Huron to the Flint River. The piping contaminated the



central New York. So, you can imagine how star struck I was when Kenya reached out to me after hearing about my dissertation study on my podcast. The couple's organizing efforts has earned them notoriety in most BLM chapters, but their personability and openness would lead you to think that no one knew who they were. After the excitement of knowing that Niecy and Kenya regularly listen to my podcast wore off and they both settled on a time to meet, I drove to interview them in person. When I arrived, they were hard at work restoring a dilapidated home Kenya's family used to live in generations ago, preparing it to be a community center of sorts. The interview took place in the backyard of the home – a community garden Niecy started two years ago.

Kenya, 28, and Niecy, 29, met at a rally in solidarity with Mike Brown – a teenager from Ferguson, Missouri who was murdered by an off-duty police officer. The two were animated by Brown's death for different reasons. Niecy shared that all she could think of was Brown's mother, as she has two sons. Kenya shared that for her, Brown's murder felt like the deadly extremes of similar violence she and other Black students faced on campus at her university. When they met, neither of them had been in relationships with women before, but both were exploring their queerness. As they grew closer, Kenya ended her then relationship and the two moved in together. They joked that they do not have an anniversary, they simply chose to "do life" together. Both are also not new to community organizing and resistance movements, raised in radically political households. Niecy's grandmother – for example – was an active member of the Black Panther Party and her parents organized the first Black farmers market in her

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water supply killing 12 and severely sickening 90 people between June of 2014 and June of 2015 (Ruble, Carah, Ellis, & Childress; 2018)

community. Kenya's father was a pastor who used his church as a community organizing hub during the 60s and 70s.

Niecy is a full-time community organizer and mother of two sons, 11 and 7 years old. She identifies as queer and is a Black Hispanic female. Kenya is a Black woman who has lived and organized in central New York her whole life. She identifies as queer and holds a bachelors degree in Gender Studies and Communication. Throughout their interview, it was so apparent that "the struggle" was not just something that they entered into outside of their home, but also grappled with amongst each other. They actively and lovingly disagreed with each other – drawing distinctions between their identities, movements, and politics that are "real" versus politics that are "coopted". Kenya was clear that she was not a parent to Niecy's sons – who were co-parented by Niecy and her ex – but nevertheless she was an elder to them and incredibly attached. They made several statements throughout our time together that boiled down to them choosing to be in their relationship. They saw their love as not just romantic, but also political as they chose to be together to create the kind of activism that could sustain themselves and their communities.

### *Revolutionships*

After coding initially, then selectively, I realized that the best way to organize the categories that emerged as I worked through my data would be to tell the story of these couples. I wanted to best capture how these couples are unique from other couples, and what me – a couples therapist – can learn clinically from them. As an experience, I named their story "Revolutionships" – the collective experiences of these 6 couples maintaining their relationships while actively resisting oppression through organizing. I realize, though, that through making a collective story and defining elements of "Revolutionships", I am actually breaking the

continuity of each couple's individual narrative. Therefore, I have made sure to name their partnerships with each interruption to make more clear where and when I use components from each of the couple's narratives to explain each component. I adopted this strategy similar to the methodology used by E. Patrick Johnson (2011) to honor the wholeness of the stories the couples shared with me.

Through my data analysis, four main components that define this experience emerged. The first component, "meeting in the movement", is defined by the politically charged ways in which each of the couples met and began their relationships. The second component, "activism as", explores all of the ways each participant defined activism as it relates to their relationships, work, and lives. There were two subthemes to "activism as", activist as an identity that developed, and defining activism. The third component, "unique strengths", speaks to the three unique subthemes that help Revolutionships sustain including both partners growing together, communication intentionality, and experiencing their relationship as a 'safe spot'. The fourth component, "unique challenge: The Gaze", highlights the impact visibility as both activists and queer women of color has on the couples' relationships and political work. Figure 1 below depicts how I theorize these four components of a Revolutionship.

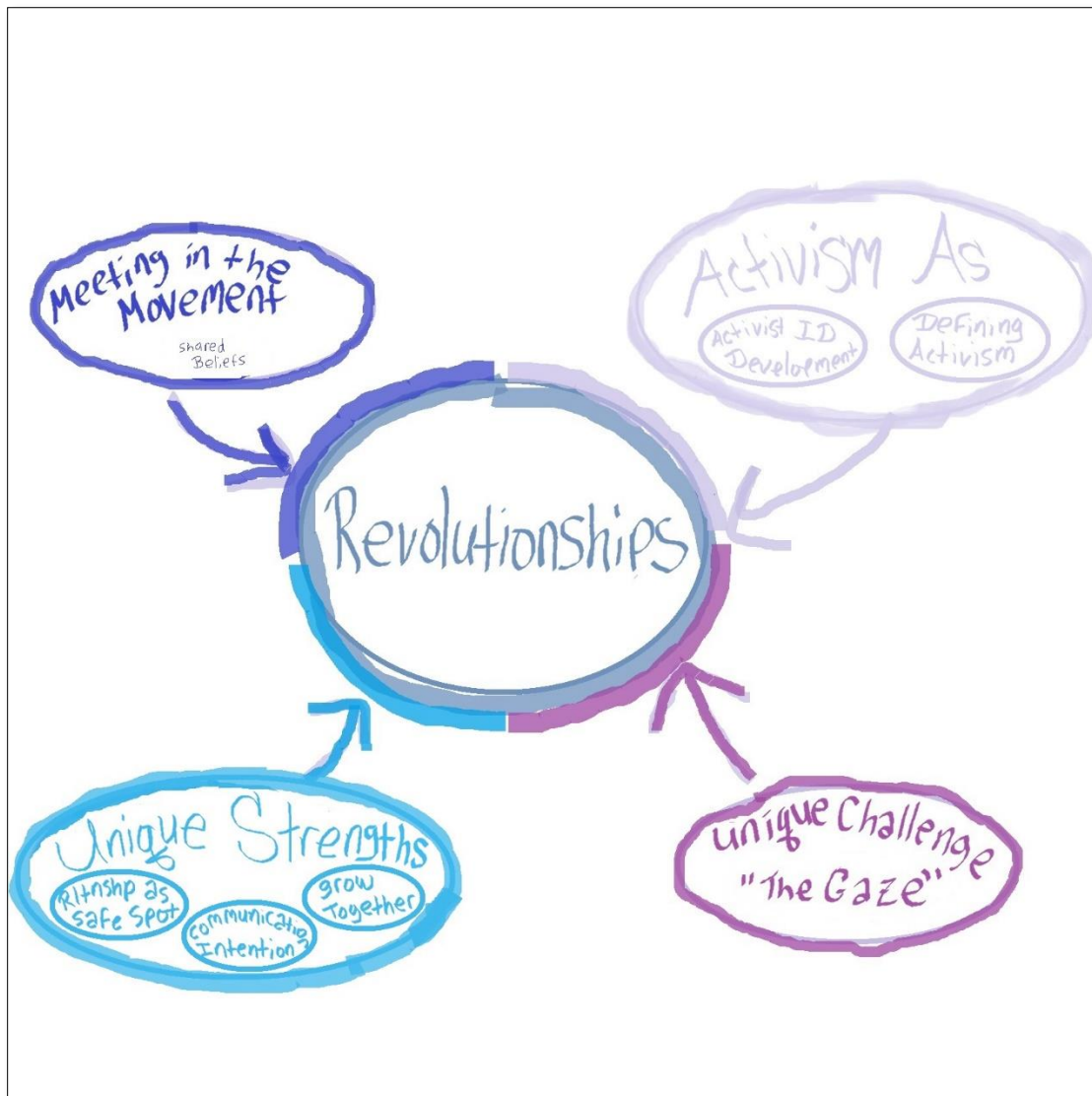


Figure 1.

#### COMPONENT I: Meeting in the Movement

According to a 2017 article in the San Francisco Chronicle (Lang, 2017), lesbians – unlike nearly every other demographic of those seeking relationships – have overwhelmingly resisted the app-focused trend of meeting someone. Instead, queer women overwhelmingly continue to meet in places that queer women have traditionally had strong presences – such as

brick-and-mortar bars and bookstores or through friends. Although this article makes no specific mentions of how racial demographics also inform this, interviewing these six couples – and if I’m being quite honest my own personal dating experiences – adds rallies, protests, and other liberation movement spaces to these places where queer women meet and form relationships as well. With the exception of *The Long-Distance Liberators* who met on the Track and Field team while in college, all of the couples met in movement spaces. Summer tells the story of how *The College Sweethearts* met:

We met through one of those spring break service trips things our college has a whole service-learning program. And so Ashley was actually a trip leader for one of the programs to do community service and to work with homeless families and learn about homelessness in the US and so I had applied to that and that's how I met Ashley ... we became good friends through that program and then we were friends for almost the whole year before we decided to get together ... I didn't know that Ashley was queer which I have been out for a long time I should say, and I was very out and loud and proud about it but I didn't know that she was you know also queer so when I found out that she was I was like alright I'm going to jump on this opportunity!

The two laughed in what felt like first date giggles and bumped shoulders with each other – coyishly re-experiencing their early relationship experiences. Ashley added between giggles that it was because of meeting on this trip that she felt connected to Summer and began the relationship. She adds:

Because we met through the service trip I think like straight away like in our friendship we were always talking about social issues like we developed and shared political language like even as friends very early on so it's like really easy to talk about a lot of

things and be on the same page and I think there's a chemistry that develops. Like you have the same ideas umm and so we were like even though it had been a year before we started dating like I think we we're constantly talking about different things and so it's like when we finally decided to get together it felt right.

In reflecting on how they met, Ashley and Summer made clear that having a shared language and perceiving one another as being on the same page in relation to social issues created a chemistry between the two of them that led to being together feeling right. *The First Generation Gems* Alvita and Qamar echoed this when recalling to me how the two of them came to form their relationship. Similarly to Ashley and Summer, they were both committed to housing accessibility struggles, and both started working at a facility that housed homeless women until they could secure housing. After meeting as coworkers in an environment with explicit social justice values, they became fast friends and soon began dating.

*The Scholar Activists* Devyn and Cassidy continued this component of meeting in the movement when telling me how they came to form their relationship. Cassidy shared that they originally met on the shuttle from their school to the Hillary Clinton rally. The two took turns telling parts of how they went from comrades to partners:

Devyn: I was just like I'ma just go umm [on the shuttle] me and Cassidy talked about this how like you were either voting for white supremacy or white feminism and that was just a bummer so that was kind of mixed feelings.

Cassidy: umm and then so then almost a year later ... I was the site coordinator for one of the new [Freedom School] sites and we were hiring interns and her name came up but I didn't recognize her name with the person that I met at the Hillary Clinton rally so I

almost didn't hire her but ended up hiring her recognizing it was her. I was like okay, cool. And then in working together kind of just fell for each other romantically.

I wrote about how much I noticed their shared interactions throughout the interview with Cassidy and Devyn, but this turn-taking anecdote of meeting on the shuttle stood out to me most when thinking of the component of meeting in the movement. Having not known each other prior to the shuttle ride, the two had an intense conversation about their values up front, discussing white feminism<sup>12</sup> and white supremacy in relation to the election. And although they did not meet in movement spaces, this relates so much to the way *The Long Distance Liberators* talked about being drawn to one another early on. Raven shared that she knew Alex was someone she could be in a relationship with because they could not only talk about politics, but agree. As the two fed each other the breakfast they prepared, Raven shared between chews:

There are people who have those stated differences who are like in relationships and I could never do that like I am so confused what do you talk about? People just like “we don't talk about politics” where I'm like I could never I *am* politics! Like we talked about queer stuff all the time in the beginning and I'm like I talk about queer stuff all the time always! With everyone! It's everything that I do and talk about!

She paused and looked over at Alex, who was nodding in silent agreement. Then she continued:

I'm just I don't understand how you can be in a relationship and like never talk about that.

Her words and Alex's agreement connected their initiating of their relationship to the other couples I interviewed in the way that they were drawn to one another because of their shared

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<sup>12</sup> 'White Feminism' is a term used in social justice communities to mean feminism that is not intersectional, or a feminism that does little to nothing to address systems of oppression and capitalism as it impacts the lives of women of color, incarcerated women, trans women, undocumented or migrant women, disabled women, queer women, women who survive poverty, and/or gender nonconforming folks.

politics and orientation to social justice. *The Clergy Mommas* expounded on this component of meeting in the movement by similarly talking about being drawn to one another because of their willingness to talk about social topics and both seeing the world through a radical Black Feminist lens. Kelindria and Imani laughed at the same time when I asked the two of them how they met. Kelindria began that the two of them had a lot of mutual friends, and at some point Imani sent her a Facebook friend request. Imani shared that they were both members of a Facebook group for Black women in Activism and she could not understand how they had all of these friends in common, but had never crossed paths. The two appreciated what each other commented on posts in the group and soon became social supports for each other. Kelindria recounts how their conversations moved from being friends of friends in the Black women in Activism group to a relationship:

Two years later umm we had still been talkin' off and on through this process and so at this point its 2015 and I started feeling like maybe something was happening between the two of us in terms of something has shifted in kind of the way that we were talking to each other but I wasn't sure... And so I finally said to her you know umm it's something happening here between the two of us? And it was like the scariest one of the scariest things I had ever done in my life and she said yeah I think so umm ... and so that kind of started us thinking about or trying to explore what was happening or if there was anything happening. It certainly wasn't a clean sort of umm like we didn't ease into that easily but you know there was a lot. We had never met in person and so we ended up making plans to meet that summer. I was going to be [near her] for a conference and we decided to meet up. And it ended up it evolved over time at first it was oh let's get



together for drinks then it was oh let's spend some *more* time together. We ended up planning what was a four day long first date.

Imani chimed in: Chiile the risk!

A risk that was worth it, as the two married a little over a year later. What stood out to me most about Kelindria and Imani's meeting in the movement was that it was in a digital space – where a lot of present day struggles for liberation spark and spread – but not one focused on dating. The digital spaces they shared were academic and activist in nature, providing resources and rich discussions about Black women using their skills to contribute to movements such as #BlackLivesMatter. Similar to what Raven shared, this gave them an intense connecting point, knowing that their identities are political and that both of them shared similar views on the nature of their oppression and the steps towards liberation. *The Choose Yous* – Kenya and Niecy – ended relationships they were previously in to be together, after what they described as a “free black summer” together, realizing that they shared these views as well. The two of them told me their relationship origin story in such detail, dissent, and color that I felt pulled into their experience of meeting in the movement. I believe that I was also able to get a glimpse into their relationship dynamics and organizing principles – seeing how they lovingly but forcefully challenged one another. After I asked them how they met, our conversation flowed in a back and forth that was both hilarious and helpful in describing what meeting in the movement looked like for them.

Kenya: We met at a protest.

Niecy: Yeah we met at a Mike Brown protest I was leading

Me: For Real? What's the story?

Kenya: Oh, okay. So um, I had wanted to get involved, I just had to do something, like this shit<sup>13</sup> just kept going on and I just didn't know what to do and all before that I had been in college so like, you know, it was college<sup>14</sup> but now I was out and I was just like trying to get involved in my community local. So I found this other girl on Facebook and she's telling me about the march. So I told him like, yeah, we're going go to the march.

Niecy: Right. This was my first, it was my first protest I had organized, I went to Ferguson<sup>15</sup>, so it was like my first time doing it here. Like we drove my truck and stuff out there<sup>16</sup>. Umm changed my life. But this was my first protest organized here and... I didn't see nobody I knew really there, but then I knew her boyfriend. Um, so like when it was over, like I went to talk to him because it was like, what you doing here? Um, yeah. And that's how we met.

Me: So how did you, How did you get together?

Niecy: Okay. So my garden was across the street from her house. Um, so basically I just used to come hang out over there. Like I bring my sons, like I'll pick them up from school we garden and then they house was down the street. So we used to go chill there because it'd be like bonfires and just a lot of organizing and actions and stuff going on that summer so that house was like the kickback spot. Umm so used to kick back over there all the time and that was it. So then we just chilled all year.

The two of them continued, describing how organizing together made them feel “free” together – exploring their queerness, religion, and political beliefs with one another. Eventually

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<sup>13</sup> “this shit” is referring to murder of unarmed Black people by police officers and vigilantes

<sup>14</sup> What is unsaid here, but understood is that she was actively involved in on-campus activism as a college student

<sup>15</sup> Ferguson, Missouri – where Mike Brown was murdered

<sup>16</sup> To Ferguson

they both acknowledged that their feelings for each other were more than just political comrades. They separated from their male partners and moved in together the next summer. Kenya shared:

We were always together and we were like having deep conversations about stuff and it was just like, I don't know, I felt safe with her. We were on the top of the Hyatt parking garage and it was like, free Black summer. And then we were just up there talking and then that was official.

This exchange between me, Kenya, and Niecy made space for them to tell their story of coming together as a couple. I loved this story so much that I almost named this component “we met at a protest”, but widened it to encompass all the movement infused ways the couples came to be – from an online activist group to riding a shuttle together to a rally. Meeting in the movement is the first component of Revolutionships, but these experiences of QWOC forming relationships in spaces where queer women have always found community is not new.

#### COMPONENT II: Activism As...

Since I used the word “activism” to frame how I recruited couples for this project, I was curious to find out how they defined the term. Like any other identity, I went into this project believing that “activist” was a label that folks who identify with it grew into. Moreover, I was interested in hearing from the couples how they fit into activism. Thankfully, through the process of talking with the couples, I got a chance to ask them how they defined the term and hear more about their activist identity development. This outlined two subthemes that define this second component of Revolutionships. Here I will first talk about how they grew into their activist identity – the first subtheme of “Activism as...”. Then I will describe ways in which they define that identity – the second subtheme of “Activism as...”.

### *Activist Identity Development*

Each couple shared their activist origin stories with me and in doing so, outlined their growth into claiming the identity. Their parents came up as grounding figures in this identity development, both in affirming ways and also in unsupportive ways. Ashley of *The College Sweethearts* describes:

For me I would say it took me a long time actually [to identify as an activist] ... or even like umm the very sort of linear path that I took was like we were doing this service trip and, I think I had always wanted to make change but I always thought of it as being very within the system through all of that and we went to this trip and it really made me see that the change is not urgent enough for people who are on it like everyday like struggling to survive. And so like it really made me question what my impact was like whether it was good enough to just follow the like set path my parents wanted me to take and very model minority myth path of like “go to law school and advocate for people through traditional means”... But half way through this conversation [with Summer, her partner] I totally switched gears from like going this really traditional government major path into thinking more about like other factors.

She continued that finding more immediate ways to create institutional change for herself and her students became her “not polite” way of doing activism, a shift that she describes as a move away from caring about the respectability politics around how people should push for change. I think it is important to point out in this anecdote from Ashley that her parents were supportive of her creating change, but had a set idea around what that could look like – namely law school. Her development as an activist shifted as she had conversations with Summer, recognizing other ways change can happen. *The First Generation Gems* also spoke to their family’s influence on their activist identity development. Qamar commented that their elders were politically active,

but often in ways that they now wish they were not, such as writing letters to congress. They continued by sharing an account of being taken to protests by their parents as a kid:

They used to take us to protest all the time like I was a very politically charged child, you know? Like when people take children into protest and make them hold signs and chant you know that shit pisses me off because like that was my reality as a child! My dad would take me – I remember going to like stand in protest to the burqa ban in France and I was like 8 years old and my dad had me holding signs. Considering like I had never had a choice around the hijab when I was growing up right? My dad made me wear it from like the ages of 6 onward. Now I have a choice and I wear it sometimes and sometimes I don't it depends on how I'm feeling ...so like I think just recognizing that like our parents were political and they did pass on that political ideology on to us whether or not they want to admit it. So like the fact that they will get upset because we're out there doing things like we're out there protesting and they're just like “wait!” and we're like but this is how you raised us to like speak our truth and be out there on the streets, so like I don't understand why you're upset.

Very quickly in this retelling of their experience Qamar moves through their development as an activist, from rejecting activism due to being forced to participate in direct actions as a kid, to acknowledging the ideology their parents instilled in them that informs their choice to participate in direct actions today. Alvita similarly explained that her family instilled ideology that informs her activism, but were not supportive of the form in which her activism took, fearing for her safety. She shared:

My mother was very stressed when I started going to Black lives matter protests and she was - for my mom like when I first started this like she used to call me her little Black

Panther baby but she didn't necessarily mean it in like the best way. Kind of like "I don't really know what you're turning into like why are you doing all of these things? Why do you feel this way? Like don't you see it's good now?" And like only since the Trump presidency has she started to like become more politically active and everything... But its because her mother was like I can say my grandmother wrote letters like very like my grandmother was a protest baby and so it's interesting that her daughter was not and then all of a sudden I am.

Qamar joked about activism "skipping a generation" in Alvita's family, and similarly to many other identity development processes, activist identity development seems to have intergenerational elements. Alvita's mom was a child of the post-Civil Rights era, growing up with the material gains from movements in the 60's, while her grandmother was an adult during the generation that pushed those movements. Sociopolitical climates impacted their level of identification with the activist identity. This is very similar to Niecy of *The Choose Yous* who shared that being an activist was "just how she was raised" because her grandmother was a Panther.

*The Long Distance Liberators* highlighted another element of activist identity development, discussing how their development as an activist developed along with other identities. Raven explained that she came into her political identity on campus. She continued:

I was finally in an environment where I was like "Oh!" Being able to connect those dots and... I really feel like I came into a consciousness at College and pretty soon after started getting involved in our campus organizing. Like I feel I did a lot of queer things on campus. Maybe around the same time a lot of those were linked also I feel like the first thing I really started to figure out was my queerness because I was around people

who are also figuring it out and that very quickly got tied into a radical black consciousness [because of]... just Trayvon and all of the things started to happen...

Raven as a queer Black student on campus found herself in a space that allowed for her to figure out her queerness, but that was silent on racist events on campus and in the world. She shared that this “snapped her awake”, and she began to quickly see her identities as intersectional. As her awareness of queerness grew, so too did her awareness of racial injustice in the world and on her campus. This growth through embodying multiple marginalized identities echoed through other couples stories of developing as an activist as well. Devyn of *The Scholar Activists* shared that her understanding of anti-Blackness grew on campus, hearing other students with marginalized identities share their experiences both on and off campus, leading her to reflect on the ways she had experienced anti-Blackness. This reflection led her to action, moved by the question “Do you care about people? Yes!” Even when the experiences were very different from her own, she found herself drawing parallels through the way she experienced trauma through queerphobia and anti-Blackness. Alvita, of *The First Generation Gems*, contrastingly talked about her selection of identity to fight for as she initially came to her activist identity on campus. She explained:

I specifically remember like my freshman year of college someone inviting me to like my first feminist Rally or whatever and I was like “look, I was born Black and I was born a woman and sometimes I feel like I can't fight for everything so I'm going to fight for like Black shit right now” [laughs] and in retrospect like it still makes me cringe.

Her cringe reaction to her college self speaks to her growth past race-first understandings of identity to an intersectional one informed by her growth as a feminist. Alvita shared that she learned through Black twitter and feminism that she does not have to “choose” a battle. Instead it

reoriented her to think about Black issues as feminist issues, and feminist issues as Black issues – a radical shift in her activist identity development. For Kelindria of *The Clergy Mamas*, her radical shift came not just in adopting an intersectional feminist framework, but in being purposeful about her activism. She described herself as an “accidental activist”, initially wanting to make sure that the voices of Black mothers like her were centered, realizing that they were too often left out. When she started working at a white led nonprofit, this centering of Black women and mothers became much more on purpose for her. As an activist who had been doing community organizing work for about ten years longer than the other couples, Kelindria also talked about her “reluctant activism” as she was called to do more and more work. She explained:

I'm a reluctant activist because ... the way that I see activism sort of played out in the world right now kind of in the woke sort of Olympics that people do it's a constant! Like you never turn it off you never kind of go to bed you never sort of close the door at the end of the night. And I am the person that like needs a separation of church and state umm and so when I was [not a direct action activist] for example, I wasn't swirling in kind of the chaos of the world 24/7 in ways that I feel like ... if you're working in kind of movement spaces, you're expected to sort of live into that in a lot of ways. In general, I think that it is an orientation in movement work to be always raging always you know, whatever and I'm just not oriented that way anymore.

Including this stage of activist identity development Kelindria is describing feels to me like a maturity in the way the movement work can look. So often campus activists and young movement workers burn out because they have not yet learned other ways their identity can manifest. Kelindria describes making a shift from her previous direct action movement work to



more advocacy approach to movement work. This phase of her activism is sustainable for her as a working mom and also allows her rest from “swirling in the chaos” of the world.

### *Defining Activism*

Overwhelmingly the couples I interviewed mentioned that activism is – well, active. Words like “change”, “move”, and “disrupting” reverberated through the transcripts of the interviews. *The College Sweethearts* not surprisingly shared very similar definitions of activism, both speaking to activism as a disruption of the status quo:

Ashley: I see activism as like any type of action or attempt to change – like alter the path of what's currently happening like the status quo so to speak so like whether it be individual or communal there's like some intention to act in a way that disrupts the current status quo towards some sort of redistribution of power toward a common vision of Justice.

Summer: Um hm and I would say something similar you make me think about like that phrase of like disrupting the status quo and being active. Taking action for your community in a way that's like disrupting the status quo for justice for oppression that your community is facing.

Here I was able to see and hear how their politics inform one another and sharpen their analysis of how they saw fit to work towards liberation. Summer and Ashley talked about their communities, which seems so connected to their ethnic backgrounds – Summer growing up on a reservation and Ashley being a first generation Taiwanese American. *The Scholar Activists* Cassidy and Devyn echoed the assertion of activism as disrupting the status quo and also riffed off of one another when defining the term.

Cassidy: I would define political activism as any sort of action that is meant to gather or that is meant to inspire people around and idea that is counter to a sort of political Norm

Devyn: I think activism – it's interesting that you use the descriptor political activism because I think that like most activism it's automatically political just by way of just personal intent or even social intent in disrupting systems of power.

The echoes of activism as resisting the status quo continued as I interviewed *The Clergy Mamas* Kelindria and Imani. Imani made sure to emphasize that she saw activism as active, that you have to be doing something to “express resistance” in order to call it activism.

Imani: I've been in activist spaces and met people who are being subversive and resistive in all kind of ways so to me activism is making a choice to resist the status quo umm you know construction of the world.

Raven, of *The Long-Distance Liberators*, also reiterated activism as active, working towards something other than the status quo. She explained:

I think about activism as like movement building or like you're working towards creating like a more just world... I think of activism as like the work but we both use that word and I feel like I talk to people and they'll be like I'm an activist and it'll just be like just thoughts! Like " I'm a very Progressive thinker" but I think of activism as the work! Like it has to – it's a verb you know! The verb doesn't look one way but you have to be doing.

Activism as a verb is also how *The Choose Yous* conceptualized the term. Niecy shared that activism is “actively taking part in the resistance”, moving beyond awareness.

Alvita, of *The First Generation Gems* shared a more intimate definition of activism which too seemed connected to her being first generation American, her parents being from Jamaica. Alvita added:

Activism I feel like is permeated throughout the way you interact with other people. So like it's not only - you know the first time when Qamar ask me to like do this I was like I'm not politically - I don't go to protests anymore like I don't do anything. But you know like I am vocal you know like I am a corrector like and I have learned ways to kind of do it in ways that people don't feel - like I literally plot on how to like talk to people in a way to widen their perspective.

Alvita named a shift in her activism from direct actions such as protests to the intimate activism of being a “corrector” and plotting on ways to widen other people’s perspectives. I connect this to her being first generation and queer in the way that under systems of oppression, Blackness in the United States is seen as a monolithic identity – assuming that all Black folks are second class citizens of this country and descended from the people enslaved here generations prior. While me and Alvita are both queer Black American women, our experiences of having to name widening perspectives as activism are different, as I am not a first generation American. I have had to do this of course, but realized I had not thought of my activism as this because my family’s roots have been in the United States long enough for us to find identity within the dominant narrative of what it means to be Black in the United States. A similarity in this widening perspectives approach to activism between Alvita and my own experiences, however, is not only doing work that resists patriarchy, racism, and white supremacy outside of our communities, but also resisting within. Alvita gave an informative example of her activism as widening perspectives in an anecdote about talking to Black men about the ways violence and oppression impact trans Black folks. She continued:

I feel like it's kind of like hey! Alvita is here and we're going to talk. I've had conversations with cis heterosexual Black men about trans identities and like literally

someone said something stupid like “oh it seems like everyone is da da da da for fun” and I was just like it's interesting that you would say that because from what I know they have higher death rates. And I listed everything that I know and I was like it seems like the only thing they get and benefit is living their truth. And then he was just like that makes sense like you're right you're absolutely right. And I was just like wow! This this happened.

She paused, almost as if to take in the shift that had occurred in her talking to him, and then continued:

And then we watch the movie about drag queens traveling - To Wong Foo or something like that and he was like “this is a movie my sister and my mom used to make me watch growing up!”

Alvita shared so much in this account. What firstly stands out here is the ways in which we as QWOC struggle with Black cis heterosexual people to resist racism, and struggle against Black cis heterosexual people to address their queerphobia and acknowledge their privilege as cisgender and heterosexual. Secondly, she says without saying that even though there is difference between the way she and the man she was talking to saw trans identities, she saw it important to widen his perspective because she saw him as a part of her community – and also as a part of the demographic that most often harm Black trans folks. She reminded him that gender queer folks have been a part of his communities, bringing up To Wong Fu. Lastly, thinking as an organizer myself, we rarely get to see the shift in consciousness that occurs through our interventions. Alvita’s perspective widening approach allowed her to see that shift in the moment.

I want to make sure that I do not construct this as simply an external resistance element of Revolutionships. While all of the couples I talked to are fierce liberationists doing the work of dismantling, they also talked about their activism in ways that are not always result-oriented or external. Ashley of *The College Sweethearts* said this to me outright:

Ashley: I guess the one thing I would say is that even though I feel like my definition is like really practical like very achievement-oriented or like results-oriented, I think I consider a lot of things that like aren't necessarily. Like so much of it is changing conversation even or like the daily habit of things.

These less achievement-oriented ways of defining activism seemed to pop up in all of my conversations with the couples. For some, it meant recognizing the ways achievement-oriented activism left out powerful community building work being done by people for whom direct action is inaccessible. For others, talking about less achievement-oriented forms of activism spoke directly to the very intimate ways they show up for each other. For example, several of the partners expressed how their relationships were activism. *The Clergy Mamas* both spoke to this relational aspect of their activism – both between themselves as two black queer women, and also in parenting their daughter Sequoia.

Imani: And you know [to Kelindria] you could probably talk more to about this we wrote that we think that mothering, and you know the act of our loving each other, whether we like it or not [laughs] *is* activism umm *is* resistance. And then of course trying to Mother Sequoia umm in this family as it's constructed *is* activism

Kelindria: yeah I think you captured it... and I would say that I'm sort of an accidental activist umm [being a mother and working]<sup>17</sup> I am now doing reproductive Justice work and sex ed work and have carried all of the lessons [from my previous job] and all of the ways that I learned about caring for people [as a parent] and considering folks whole lives into my work.

Imani: Kelindria not gon say... [but] I was even more drawn to Kelindria early in our relationship when I was visiting her in [her city] and understanding the ways that she had to show up subversively at work even in the context of being a chaplain.

While talking to *The Choose Yous*, I realized how much their relationship was interconnected with their work as well. They talked about their partnership as another element of their community organizing and even discussed creating their own community collective after becoming a couple. I annoyingly kept asking if this meant they were "together", and each time they would respond that they were "partners". The exchange went like this:

Me: I feel like y'all kind of checked me a little bit earlier when I was like "so are yall together or what?" Y'all was like "we're partners!" So I wrote that and like circled it because it feels like the relationship has more meaning than just like girlfriends. Do you know what I'm saying? It's – you have a political investment, you know, y'all have like a community investment.

Niecy: Basically! Business partners like we own our things together.

Kenya: right, right, right, right.

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<sup>17</sup> This is an excerpt from a much longer quote from Kelindria, so I summarized or added context to make the selected part more clear

Niecy: Um, so nahh that's the hitta to the left of me<sup>18</sup> like for real!

They continued that activism is not only the tearing down, but the process of building the institutions they want to see in a socially just world as they tear down. Kenya explained:

My version of activism is like reimagining what happens after this is torn down and so like being that person and that's not a common place to be because we got so many like front liners that are like in the streets or like leading the process and stuff like that. And that's not like where my activism fall like I see [it] as like a piece of the pie. But also see like the other side is like healing where we are and then also reimagine it for where we want to go, where we want to be in... the actual politicking just not for me and so reimagining the world and like reading books and stuff to be like, oh that works and this works and then maybe all of this works together and then I can actually practice it because of [the organization we created together] and because we can actually implement practices like outside of that other shit<sup>19</sup>.

Raven of *The Long Distance Liberators* reiterated the sentiments shared by Kenya around activism also being healing. When I interviewed her and Alex, she shared:

The first thing I think of [when I think of activism] is like you're working towards creating like a more you're working towards creating a more just world and I think that looks like just can be obviously I know you already know but you know that can be healing work like that is just and I feel like that's work that gets kicked under the rug or devalued you know... I mean there's a long Legacy of things not being good so I... think

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<sup>18</sup> This is a popular lyric from a Young MA song, who is a Black lesbian. Moreover, hitta to the left of me is an African American Vernacular English phrase that means someone who is more than a friend, whose love runs deeper than traditional family bonds, and who will do anything to keep you safe or protected.

<sup>19</sup> "that other shit" is referring to being on the front lines

about the things that are missing in our lives and what it would mean to like be able to make your existence more whole. And sometimes that's like space to breathe and think space to heal and process.

### COMPONENT III: Unique Strengths

The third component – unique strengths – speaks to the three unique ways Revolutionships sustain including both partners growing together, communication intentionality, and experiencing their relationship as a ‘safe spot’. Here I will describe these three strengths as subthemes of the overall unique strengths component of revolutionships.

#### *Subtheme A: Growing Together*

While all of the couples I interviewed for this project could currently be considered far left radicals in terms of their political beliefs and practices, they all shared that a unique experience they had through being together was growing in their politics. Growing together in revolutionships expanded each partners understanding of intersectionality, witnessing the ways oppression impacted their partner differently than it impacted them. Ashley, a first generation Taiwanese American, of *The College Sweethearts* spoke to this subtheme in her relationship with her partner Summer, who is indigenous. Ashley shared that she learns more about culture and race in her relationship, stating:

I still think I'm constantly like changing my ideas and growing and reading more and I think that's where it's really great to be in a partnership with someone like who we come from totally different backgrounds like we understand each other and like every way that she grows helps me grow too.

Ashley’s statement also highlights the interconnectedness of their growth together. Every way that Summer grows helps Ashley get better. Similarly, Summer grows through being in a relationship with Ashley. *The First Generation Gems* expanded on this subtheme of growing



together through differences in their identities. Alvita spoke to her growth as an ally through loving Qamar and watching them be an ally for identities they do not hold while navigate their gender. Alvita shared:

I can say flat out that Qamar has given me a lot more examples of how to be better like a better ally umm like seeing witnessing how much of an ally they are for like identities outside of their own has prompted me to do a lot more research and be a lot more vocal like whereas I would say before I felt it you know? I knew that like certain things were wrong and now like I actually research ways that I can be a better ally. Like better stand up you know. They definitely widen my perspective in certain things.

Both Ashley and Alvita also highlighted the work that went into growing with their partners through difference. Qamar modeled allyship for Alvita, but she went further, researching on her own. This is similar to Ashley discussing reading more as she witnessed Summer growing. *The Scholar Activists* spoke to a different dynamic of growing together politically – accountability. As grassroots organizers, being accountable to a community is crucial to being principled and effective. Devyn adds that having Cassidy as her partner holds her accountable. She shared:

I couldn't imagine what organizing would be like without having Cassidy as a sounding board... holding me accountable for my actions while also being like “you can give yourself a little leniency because you do a lot of work” and she's able to recognize that within me and herself. I think the relationship helps if anything maintain the political activism I have going on in my life and the political activism does occasionally like weigh on us sometimes but it's just proof that that relationship is really necessary in the face of political activism.

Kenya of *The Choose Yous* echoed Devyn's sentiments in her statements about her relationship with Niecy, sharing:

I feel like the growth we continue to make like personally and politically is part of like being together. So they like feed each other. help each other grow and stuff its beautiful. And love.

Devyn and Kenya see their growth as organizers as intertwined with their love and relationships with their partners. Both expressed that their relationships help them grow politically, but that the growth politically also makes them feel more connected romantically to their partners. *The Choose Yous* also added that growing together was also a personally challenging process that pushed them to grow in their emotional maturity and conflict resolution skills. Kenya spoke to this, sharing:

It's a lot for us to like be a queer couple and stay together. And like we've been really building and working through a lot of different things cause there's so many levels. I would say initially, yeah, we had bumps or like feeling some kind of way but then I felt like actually doing the work and actually like growing through that. And I wasn't in the same place as her at first to like deal with that or deal with that in like a healthy way. But then it was because it was just like I love her so I really want to like work through this. And I know it was work that I had to do it wasn't work that she needed to do for me it was like something I actually had to do it and it wasn't, it wasn't comfortable at all.

This unique strength of revolutionships allowing for both partners to grow together is more than just a commitment to each other as partners or comrades in the struggle, but complexly seeing each other as both. Growing together as an subtheme of revolutionships also seems to allow for space between the two partners to see each other as differently experiencing and navigating

systems of oppressions, as evidenced in Kenya's statement. Additionally, Kenya highlights how this growth process is not always comfortable for them, even with the love and support of each other. The growth is still challenging, but they choose to do it in order to love one another.

*Subtheme B: Communication Intentionality*

Another unique strength the couples I interviewed discussed was intentionality about communication. What made this strength stand out as an subtheme of their relationships to me was how similar their languaging was around communication. Some of the couples used the same terminology and words when discussing their communication. Communication for the couples I interviewed for this project was not something that they passively engaged in. Instead, they named being deliberate about deeply talking to one another as a factor in maintaining their relationship. Qamar of *The First Generation Gems* stated:

I would say that things that help [us stay together] I'm just going to go back to communication and intentionality because honestly that's the most important for me is making sure that we're communicating and we're intentional about what we're saying about what we're meaning and keeping in mind that like if we do mess up we have space for that and we can talk through that umm I don't know I think it's also just a lot of checking in.

Alvita, Qamar's partner agreed after they shared the importance of communication in maintaining their relationship. *The Scholar Activists* used similar language to discuss what keeps them together – naming communication and being intentional about communicating. Cassidy shared:

I mean communication is probably the biggest thing for us and we have two very different communication styles as you can gather [laughs]. So that's always been umm an uphill battle for us is you know getting ahead of our communication styles and figuring out how to best communicate with each other umm and so we're constantly doing it but I feel like if we weren't doing that like there's no way with everything that's going on –with all that she does and all that I do – that we'd be able to maintain. So because we're both very intentional about communicating well with each other, that that has helped sustain us because otherwise yeah we would have been done a long time ago.

This statement by Cassidy highlights several things about communication intentionality for revolutionships. Firstly, I was struck by how similar the wording around communication was to Qamar as the two of them not only have different sociocultural experiences, but also do very different political work. This seems to speak to the experience of being in a QWOC activist couple developing a collective language. Secondly, their intentionality is not simply stated, but Cassidy talks about communication styles – showing that the two of them have explored how each other receives information and expresses themselves. Lastly, Cassidy ends the statement emphasizing how integral communicating intentionally is to sustaining their relationship. Devyn added that being intentional within their relationship about communication also makes room for them to make mistakes. Devyn continues:

And also just like giving ourselves grace in our relationship. Like she talks about communication styles like sometimes we are too intentional about communication styles to the point where we're really like – I think we've both had our share of trauma. So like a lot of times the really common theme that I bring up in our arguments especially when we go from 0 to 100 is like something that I'm like always perpetually afraid of is like

I'm being toxic like are we good to each other? Like what if this is not a good relationship for each other? Because I'm all about trauma healing and making sure that people are engaged in the healthy relationships for them especially as black queer women. And so I'm just like what if we're actually being abusive towards each other? You know? What if this what if that what if this? And she's like we make mistakes! We argue and that's okay. like we don't have to be the perfect black queer woman couple out here like we just you know we struggle it's fine. And so communicating intentionally and then giving ourselves grace.

Continuing with the importance of intentionality, *The Clergy Mamas* used the word 'intentional' a lot. It felt very important that they convey that they are thoughtful about what they are doing in their partnership, from values they pass on to their daughter, to spending time with each other. Kelindria explained:

I think that one of the things that we've been really intentional about since we got together really you know even when we were living in two different places is that we really – I think we're lucky in that we get to spend a lot of time together. So we were in a long distance relationship umm but we saw each other fairly regularly. And [now] I think that because we both work from home like I was saying earlier we are able to we are also privileged to spend time together in a way that most working couples where two people are working outside the home or you know one person might be a full-time student or whatever you know you don't get to do. But we have really been intentional about having fun together... we are trying to be intentional about not just traveling for work and using that as our travel so we travel for work and sometimes were able to travel together Sequoia has to come with us sometimes as well umm ... and we really want to create

memories um for her we're really and for us we're really you know that's important to us and so that's something else too really trying to be intentional about you know having those experiences because she has to share us a lot. You know she does have to share us umm or go with us places that she might not necessarily want to be in so you know and we've taken her a lot of different places and so we try to be umm intentional about that particularly as she becomes a teenager.

Imani also talked about their intentionality around finding “mentor couples” to help them feel less isolated and to help them communicate effectively. Alex and Raven – *The Long Distance Liberators* – had an exchange around intentionality in relation to communication that seemed so connected to the ways *The Clergy Mamas* described the early stages of their relationship, before they lived together. The two reflected on maintaining their relationship long distance. Alex began:

I mean like yeah we're just like always talking always texting we try to FaceTime at least two or three times a week. I think like because we're not always in the same place a lot of it is verbally and just like whenever we we're both very busy so like whenever we do have time to just like sit down and kind of talk and just recap you know like how has your past few days been? Is there anything going on at work? Things like that. I think like yeah I think that's just like verbally being like or what's up? Like how you know how is that event you told me about yesterday? How was I know you had this big meeting yesterday how did that go? So a lot of it is verbally checking-in I think it I wonder how it would be if we like we're in the same place all the time?

Raven chimes in: yeah

Alex, obviously thinking out loud:

I imagine it will still be verbal.

Raven continued:

I think that like intentional checking in is not something that I it's like it's a thing that I've built into my relationship that's like very intentional being like is not just like hi hello how are you we are in this relationship entity but like how are you as a human being? And I feel like it's a thing we do regularly. But that's an intentional thing that we have like set in our relationship.

Alex joins and adds:

It feels pretty normal like we don't really think about it but it's also not normal I guess. For me it's just like something like actually I want to see how she's doing umm but yeah I think a lot of it is communication and it wasn't until I started talking to some of my other friends who were doing distance that I like started to realize that –

Raven excitedly cuts in:

They don't communicate!

This exchange between Raven and Alex exemplifies the back and forth of their communication and also connects to aspects of what the other couples shared. Because of the unique challenges of their relationship, they are intensely curious about each other's lives and actually want to know about each other's days – making their check in's much deeper than routine, "how was your day?" questions. Additionally, they set parameters around what communication looks like for them – making sure to facetime twice a week when they are not in the same space with each other. They noticed this as a unique strength in looking at other couples who seemingly do not communicate intentionally. Lastly in defining this subtheme of communicating intentionally, Alvita of *The First Generation Gems* shared a statement that not

only spoke to how they prioritize communicating, but why it strengthens their relationship to do so. She shared:

For me it's really mindfulness around communication and like a present to present awareness you know like whenever I start to feel anxiety about the future or about the directions that things could go, like we're dealing with it now. Like Shadows have to be dealt with like they have to be dealt with. And even now with the way that we're trying to normalize the alt right and like you know humanize all of the bullshit that they are doing like that means we are creating more ways to sweep it under the rug umm so for me it is a constant grounding in the sense that like when you have little to no control over like these far-reaching things like what do you ground yourself in? And like I ground myself I choose to ground myself in love. Like I choose to ground myself in like acceptance I choose to ground myself in like the people around me that I feel with you know? Like the conversations that I have with people that can help them feel not alone in this time like all of those are the things that I ground myself in while I'm trying to not keel over from depression and hopelessness.

Alvita weaves in and out of the larger far reaching contexts that their relationship exists in and the intimate grounding in the day to day experience of love. Being intentional about communicating with each other, then, feels like a political tactic to not “keel over” from the impact of activism and oppression. They do not recreate larger social norms of normalizing abuse and sweeping things under the rug and instead address shadows as they happen.

*Subtheme C: Relationship as a ‘Safe Spot’*

The final unique strength echoed throughout my interviews with the couples was experiencing their relationships as safe havens away from both the impact of identity-based



oppression and the burnout of organizing. While each couple talked about it differently, the wording of the relationship being a ‘safe spot’ stood out to me most. This subtheme speaks to the ways their relationships insulated them from external stress that comes along with participating in movements for liberation. This subtheme is additionally defined by the couples experiencing their relationship as a buffer to the impact of microaggressions, direct violence, and legislation that stripped them of rights and protection. Alvita and Qamar of *The First Generation Gems* explained this subtheme and ultimately named this strength in my conversation with them. Alvita began:

My relationship kind of makes me more aware of the reality of the world and which that I am moving in now, you know. Like I am just far more aware of the way that other people are interacting with the world in a way that I don't consider acceptable you know that does not necessarily work with my morals or the way that I feel like people should be treated like humans.

Qamar agreed and added:

I think also it lends itself to like maybe our relationship as kind of a safe spot. Which is nice and healing.

Wanting clarification, I asked:

Can you say more? Like what do you mean your relationship as a safe spot?

Qamar continued:

Yeah. Especially like where we work at like if we're having a bad day or something that is happening or if like somebody called the police for the 7th time which is also just like wild right!... And that's stressful so like whenever things happen like that are stressful at work we can always like dip down to each other's floors and be like this happened and I

like need a moment so let's like breathe together. She's really good at that shit [laughs]  
 She's good at making me feel in my body which isn't something that trans kids are really good at sometimes. So I think sometimes our relationship can be like a safe pocket or like while it does make us hyper-aware about what's happening outside, because of what's happening outside we can become a little bit insular and be like hey let's stay here for a moment and breathe.

Alvita agreed and restated what Qamar was sharing:

Yeah I definitely agree with that like this is the Oasis [laughs] it's a really beautiful space I feel like that we have created... and we're going to create this little hug love cocoon thing and we're going to pretend like the world doesn't exist for a little bit.

As I coded the rest of the transcripts, this exchange between Qamar and Alvita continued to stand out as an example of their relationships as a safe spot. Describing the relationship as a “beautiful space”, “oasis”, and “safe pocket”, both of them spoke to the break away from the onslaught of oppression they experience. Beyond that, their relationship functions as a breath away from the demands of their job which causes stress as well. Qamar even highlighted how Alvita made them feel “in their body”, which is an experience that is often difficult for folks who deal with dysphoria. Moreover, Alvita emphasized that their safe space as a couple was built – drawing attention to fact that the safety the two of them experience together was worked for and cocreated. Summer and Ashley similarly described this subtheme of their relationship, sharing an experience of their relationship being a buffer to trauma after the 2016 election. Summer started:

I think a lot about this after Trump was elected as president. There was like the day after like Ashley and I just like laid in bed all day and just like cried [laughs] together. But then it was like okay we got to pick ourselves up and then like [the relationship] was a lot

of support in that way where I felt like – I felt the weight of like what's going to happen to our people? Like what's going to happen to immigrants in our country? Like what's going to happen to like people of color? Like there was like so much weight on me that day... But like we were there for each other in the way like we got to pick ourselves up like we're strong women of color like let's let's you know be the resistance we want to see in the world and so like I think just having each other in that moment and like being there to console each other in different ways I think definitely definitely was a buffer to like trauma or feeling like you know that the survival of our people was at risk.

Ashley agreed and added:

And like I think there are many times where like you go in to the world and you feel either or you put something out into the world and you feel unsure about it or unsafe or like something might happen. And you don't know what it is and it's like really great in that moment to have someone who's like no put it out there! Like you're out there! And I got you! So literally that same around the same day after Trump was elected like we were walking down the street umm and some – I don't even know what he yelled at us – but like someone just yelled at us at a bar and like it did feel really threatening but I think we were just, and then Summer was like umm did someone attack us?

Here *The College Sweethearts* shared a pointed moment where their own survival, and the survival of folks who share their identities, felt threatened. They both shared how supporting and encouraging each other to not shrink or hide away because of fear of what might happen acted as a buffer to trauma after the election. They had one another to cry to and normalize the experience, but to also hearten each other to not collapse into dejectedness – acting as a buffer. Summer also emphasized how they continue to push each other to be out there, knowing that the

other will support her. Lastly, Ashley added an experience of the two of them being harassed on the street and having one another to normalize the interaction as an attack. Cassidy and Devyn of *The Scholar Activists* discussed their relationship in similar ways, but beyond that I witnessed them grounding and regulating each other throughout my interview with them. There was a moment in our conversation where Devyn described experiencing anti-Blackness as a child and I watched Cassidy rub her back and shoulder as she recounted the experience. The safety of their relationship was felt. And the two of them shared other instances of experiencing their relationship as a safe spot as well. Cassidy started:

If I didn't have her to be able to work through some of that stuff and process some of that stuff<sup>20</sup> I don't know that I would be able to show up every day in the ways that I do. I still show up right, but I don't know if I show up in the same way that I'm able to because of the relationship that I'm in. And so the way in which we act as support for each other through our love languages and as just a sounding board to kind of just process all of the daily toils that happened. That's always been good.

Devyn continued:

I think my relationship with her has like drastically lowered my tolerance for whiteness and man maleness and like all the ish<sup>21</sup> just because like being in a relationship with a black queer woman it's so rejuvenating and so there's a lot of, it's hard sometimes right because people fight and we fight sometimes. but like compared to my fights with like other people like me and Cassidy fights they're like "you're taking up too much space" like "you know you didn't take whatever I said seriously" ... not a lot of couples are

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<sup>20</sup> "that stuff" is referring to microaggressions and stress in the workplace

<sup>21</sup> Slang for shit

talking about that stuff most couples arguing about you know you looking at this woman blah blah blah it's like you know. She already has done the work just intersectionally as like a black queer woman in regards to adjusting like problematic stuff... so like you know she's like really beautiful wonderful thing in my life that's adding a lot of energy and like been really healing for me... In a lot of ways like people I've dated before they like kind of understand but they don't really understand. Like men they kind of like hear what I'm saying and they're like “okay you're just like this crazy feminist and whatever” but she's like fuck the system! Like I've never had that before like the same enthusiasm and the same passion and it like drives me and some days when I have no energy like she's able to be like Devyn is in a mood and like let me try to navigate this the best way I can.

Later Devyn reiterated that she could not imagine being an activist without having Cassidy as a sounding board. Here the two of them explain how their relationship is rejuvenating for them individually – allowing Cassidy to show up more present. Devyn even compares their dynamic to other relationships, noticing that their arguments are about keeping each other whole and safe as opposed to having a wandering eye. She even explores how their relationship is different than her relationships with men in the past. Similar to *The College Sweethearts* - the two of them normalized each others experiences of microaggressions. This allowed safety in the way that they were affirmed and not seen as the “crazy feminist”. This feels uniquely important to these revolutionships in the way that affirming political understandings of an experience strengthens their connection as a couple. Raven and Alex – *The Long Distance Liberators* - talked broadly about feeling sustained by one another when political happenings threaten their lived experiences. Alex commented:

I don't think at least for me there has never been an instance where is like we've had where I thought like “oh maybe we should end our relationship over politics” but there have been many instances where it's like something political happens and we like [clings to Raven] okay so!

In this brief comment and action Alex gestured to how Raven provides safety for her in times of political distress. Similar to the emotion conveyed by Ashley in discussing crying together in bed after the election, they held each other and not only provided an emotional safety to one another, but also a political one – knowing that they would not dismiss their reactions to political events that threaten their lives. They saw one another's physical and emotional safety as connected to their liberatory politics, therefore any attack on marginalized people in the streets or in the statehouses was an intimate attack that they dealt with together. The couples did not discuss experiencing their relationship as a safe spot as erasing the challenges they face or the fights they have as partners, but that having each other changed the way they experience these challenges. Words like “buffer”, “sounding board”, and “breathing” seem to focus on the ways in which their relationship allows for them to not experience the full brunt of stress, burnout, or hardship they would experience if they were facing these challenges single.

#### COMPONENT IV: Unique Challenge – The Gaze

The fourth component of revolutionships – the gaze – highlights the impact visibility as both activists and queer women of color has on the couples' relationships and political work. Whenever I start to talk about this unique struggle, I use the phrase “the gaze”, a phrase that Cassidy of *The Scholar Activists* used when discussing this experience. The couples described being hypervisible for being queer women of color in a relationship with another queer woman of color and also for their movement work. This hypervisibility played out in various ways for

the couples, but nonetheless added a unique adversity to them that other couples may not experience as acutely. Simultaneously, the gaze also came with moments that may be seen as admiration from others, but that the two of them experienced as pressure. In this exchange with Cassidy and Devyn, the two describe “the gaze”:

Devyn: So it's been it's been interesting dating Cassidy because before I was dating like Cassidy already has a big name in the spaces that we occupied and so they're like oh are you dating Cassidy? Like okay I know Cassidy and like I was like yeah okay I know she's cool whatever right!

I noticed Cassidy laughing:

Shes laughing [laughs]

Devyn continued through Cassidy's laughter:

And so many things were happening where Cassidy would tell people like you know I'm dating Devyn I think, I hope it happened!

Cassidy:

Yes!

Devyn continues:

People call us a power couple though and so that's been really interesting because we identify as black queer women and you don't really get a lot of black queer women in [our city]. Couples at least

Cassidy adds:

But we've talked about that at length in terms of like whenever somebody does call us a power couple it always brings us back to this conversation of how much power do we actually have in this system structure as black queer women? We have very little to no

power and people are calling us a power couple! It's like that's not how that works! And I you know, in our society we find that juxtaposition really interesting

I then asked:

So how do how do you define “power couple” then? And how do you fall outside of that?

Cassidy laughed loudly again, and Devyn answered:

I think we are a power couple like me and Cassidy are like low key the shit right? And we have a lot of pressures on us. A lot of eyes on us like as black queer women in a relationship like we already like we've already gone through spaces in which people either expect a lot of us or they look down on us. Just like a really weird mixture of we really admire you and like you we you can't be as like powerful as people want you to be.

Devyn opened here with a reflection on what it was like dating Cassidy, who was already well known for her organizing and scholarship in their town. As the two of them talked through the gaze on their relationship, Devyn questions if Cassidy made people aware of their relationship and Cassidy reassures her.

As the two of them talked it also seemed as if their confidence in their own work and support to the other as a partner was challenged when people praise one of them. Devyn also discusses here the notion of a “power couple” and the two unpack what power they truly have in society as Black queer women. Despite all of the organizing efforts and change their work has brought about, they still contended with the very felt impact of systemic oppression queer people, Black people, and women experience. They were looked down upon while simultaneously looked at to change the wrongs in their community. What Cassidy calls the “juxtaposition” of having no power over in society, but being expected to be powerful adds a



pressure to their relationship that they experience as a stressor. *The Clergy Mamas* talked about this hypervisibility as a QWOC couple as well, and the ways that the gaze impacted their marriage. Imani started:

I think that that can be a threat – like having the gaze of other people on your relationship can be threatening. Even if that's like an adoring it an adoring gaze, right? I think like anything that makes you atypical or abnormal or exceptional is threatening you know? We just out here trying to pay our bills and you know? And so I would say that that's sort of a below the radar threat but it's still there.

Kelindria added:

And she has a very as I was mentioning a more forward facing kind of ministry like because I am attached to her you know my name is more out there in ways that it wasn't before. She had already had a public ministry and was more forward facing. I was fine not having that but it's you know I've I picked up a little bit of that [laughs and touches Imani]. No it's fine but I'm saying that so when you are partnered with somebody who everybody want to be next to – and I don't mean that in like a salacious way but I mean that in a you know we're in spaces and people are drawn to her. You can sometimes feel invisible or you can sometimes feel like – we've been in spaces before where she has led a service or preached or whatever and had you know it was an emotional experience and when it was over I was headed to go to her to hug her or whatever and like had to get through 15 people you know what I'm saying! Like and I you know I don't really have a poker face so

Imani laughed and said quickly:

She not the one!

Kelindria continued:

So those kind of things and so we've had to talk about what that looks like when folks you know act like I don't exist

Imani and Kelindria shared candidly about how navigating being with someone who everyone wants to spend time with impacted public dynamics of their relationship. Kelindria describes at times feeling invisible as a partner because others would surround Imani after a program, preventing her from consoling her emotional wife. She also had to work through being more recognizable as a partner to Imani, whose activism and ministry was much more public than hers. Imani also added important nuances to how the gaze was threatening to them as a couple. Imani explained that the gaze made them abnormal – they were not allowed normalcy of life as a couple. At other points in our conversation, she talked to how every little thing they do – such as grocery shopping and paying bills – was considered “exceptional” because they are a queer couple. She expressed that although people may think this is encouraging, it made them feel hypervisible and on display. This speaks again to the paradox of oppression in that their relationship is not taken seriously – because they are queer – and is also praised for things that other couples are not praised for. Imani also mentioned having to evoke each other to avoid erasure of their partner and acknowledge their relationship even when the other is not there to combat the erasure of her wife.

Balancing erasure while managing hypervisibility is a challenge they face as a couple because they are both queer women of color. *The Choose Yous* – Niecy and Kenya – also stressed the struggles caused by hypervisibility and expressed that it had even caused them to fight at times. They were both out of work due to a car accident and struggling with poverty, but at the same time being interviewed for their activism in national media outlets. Kenya shared that

the time was isolating and turned to the internet for community. Niecy explained that the visibility while still struggling with life stressors was tough. She started:

Like we talked about like our activism, but then it's like it's a lot for us to like be a queer couple and stay together and like we've been really building and working through a lot of different things cause it's like there's so many levels.

Kenya added:

Like, its a lot I would say. I'm more connected with people through social media and things like that like I don't think I have a base of friends that I like specifically could talk to because most of my friends are not queer.

Niecy:

Or don't like me.

Kenya:

Or they don't like her. So that's not a space that I would go. Yeah. So it was really like independent study, you know, reading and stuff and confronting issues that I had and like I had to get to the root cause of why I felt the way I felt [when Niecy would be doing interviews or organizing without me]. And then when I had talked to her about that, she's like, that's not what it was. I was like, I just felt like mad rejected like you was rejecting me. Like you had your attention all everywhere else or whatever and then like we had to have conversations about that but I had to name that like I had to really like be like what is that feeling?

Here Kenya shared how she experienced Niecy prioritizing organizing as rejection within their relationship. She was reassured by Niecy that she was not rejecting her by participating in the work she was doing, but Kenya still felt this way and explored why she did. This intimate

rejection echoes the paradox Cassidy named, and the real ways it challenges revolutionships when the two partners do not respond to the demands of hypervisibility in the same ways. The gaze, then, very pointedly threatened their intimacy, communication, and connectedness as a couple.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

My dissertation study explored the experiences of queer women of color maintaining intimate relationships while participating in contemporary movements for liberation. Using a Black feminist narrative grounded theory approach, I aimed to develop a framework marriage and family therapists can use to support QWOC maintaining romantic relationships while engaged in contemporary liberation movements, informed by the couples themselves. Because many couples therapy studies centering sexuality have overlooked race, and multicultural couples therapy studies have overlooked sexuality and gender, there had been no explorations into the experiences of QWOC couples prior to my project. As a result, relational therapy models and theories are often culturally insensitive to the complexities of navigating multiple systems of oppression. Additionally, the experiences of QWOC couples is uncaptured. In order to equip therapists with cultural specificity to work with QWOC couples, they must be included in the research that informs perspectives and best practices in couples therapy. It is my hope that this project ignites a practice of inclusion of QWOC in couples therapy research. This inclusion will not only to shift the paradigm of applying models and theories developed through work with White heterosexual couples to all couples, but will also prepare more mental health practitioners to do culturally sensitive work with QWOC specifically. In this chapter I will synthesize my findings from chapter four with considerations from current and past research and literature. I will also present a model I have constructed based on this synthesis. Implications for training and clinical work with QWOC activist couples will also be addressed in this chapter. The strengths and limitations of my project will then be detailed, followed by suggestions for future research.

Grounded theory research aims to explain phenomena by developing a theory grounded in collected data as opposed to testing measurable hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2014). Instead of aiming to be generalizable, grounded theory aims to provide a situated explanation of the context participants describe. Essentially, grounded theory seeks to explain why something is happening in the way it is by richly exploring a unique experience. Through my project, I described Revolutionships – the experience of QWOC maintaining their relationships while organizing for liberation. The four components of Revolutionships that emerged from my interviews with the 6 couples were *Meeting in the Movement; Activism as; Unique Strengths* including the relationship as a safe spot, growing together, and intentionality around communication; and *Unique Challenge: The Gaze*.

#### *Meeting in the movement*

Component I of the Revolutionship experience was *Meeting in the movement*. Summer and Ashley of *The College Sweethearts* met on a service trip working with homeless and transient populations. Qamar and Alvita - *The First Generation Gems* - similarly met through working together at a women's shelter. Cassidy and Devyn, *The Scholar Activists*, met on a bus to a Hilary Clinton Rally. *The Clergy Mamas* Kelindria and Imani met in a Facebook group for Black women involved in activism. *The Choose Yous* Niecy and Kenya met at a rally for Mike Brown. Although *The Long Distance Lovers* Raven and Alex shared that they met through the Track and Field team at their university, what brought them closer was organizing around instances of racism and queerphobia on their team and campus.

In a talk at Syracuse University that I attended, queer scholar activist Angela Davis attested that most of the hardcore activists were women (DAVIS AT SU). In my experience this has continued to be the case as well, with women and femmes being central to educating,

agitating, and organizing in grassroots political spaces. Similarly to Kenya and Niecy, many women in those spaces also began to explore their own gender and sexuality, which I credit to questioning hegemonic systems of cisheteropatriarchy. It is hard to uncritically identify as heterosexual when learning about and organizing around intersectional feminist politics. I want to be clear that I am not saying that being an intersectional feminist in and of itself causes women to divest from compulsory heterosexuality. I mean that it does seem to embolden folks to question the truths they have been indoctrinated with around relationships, sexuality, and dating – as echoed in Niecy’s statements about her family member’s reactions to her being queer for example. With so much in common politically and socially, the intimate friendships and political camaraderie between folks – who identified as queer before and for those who were new to queerness – blossomed into more for these couples.

To understand how specific this experience is to QWOC couples who are engaged in political activism, I looked at the How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey out of Stanford University (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2017). This online survey was initially conducted in 2009, with the 2017 version being a repeat of the survey, nearly a decade later. The Stanford survey had 3,510 respondents – 400 of which identified as Lesbian, Bisexual or Gay. The results provided no other demographic information, outside of current relationship status (Rosenfeld, et al, 2017). Of the couples that met after 2000, meeting online or through a dating app was the most common way they reported meeting, accounting for 18% of couples who met in or after 2000. Other common ways reported by couples who met in or after 2000 were being introduced by friends – 17% - and meeting at bars – 16% (Rosenfeld, et al, 2017). Of all the responses couples gave to the Stanford survey, the one that seems most similar to *Meeting in the movement* was “volunteering together”, which accounted for only 3.4% of respondents who met in or after

2000. Because 5 out of the six couples I interviewed specifically shared that they met in movement spaces, this may be a unique component of revolutionships in comparison to the general ways people meet and initiate relationships.

Lang (2017) reported that dating apps focused for use by lesbians have struggled because queer women overwhelmingly continue to meet in places that queer women have traditionally had strong presences – such as brick-and-mortar bars and bookstores or through friends. I add here that social justice movement spaces are also places that queer women have traditionally had a strong presence. Whether it be through lived experiences of injustice or being connected to multiple communities impacted by oppression, QWOC are core organizers in most struggles for liberation within the United States – currently and historically. This speaks to why meeting on service trips, at protests, and on busses to rallies are the spaces in which the couples I interviewed reported meeting. Similar to the Zapatista couple in the González Castillo case study (2017), the QWOC couples I interviewed fell in love through shared political values in spaces where they contributed time and passion and continued to organize together. Not only being able to talk about politics, but agree on them and move to action around politics is an experience that united these couples.

#### *Activism As*

The *Activism As* component of Revolutionships explored how each of the couples grew into the identity of ‘activist’ and also how they defined activism. Through the process of talking with the couples, I got a chance to hear more about their activist identity development and ask them how they defined the term. Each couple shared their activist origin stories with me and in doing so, outlined their growth into claiming the identity. Their parents came up as grounding figures in this identity development, both in affirming ways and also in unsupportive ways. This



highlighted an intergenerational subtheme to this identity, similar to many other identity development processes. *The Choose Yous* for example shared that being an activist was just the way they were raised, so their family encouraged their political work. *The First Generation Gems* also spoke about going to protests as kids and having active parents, but noted that this initially caused them to deidentify with activism – feeling as if it was not their choice. Their families also seemed unsupportive of their activism, however their family’s disapproval of them protesting actually stemmed from fearing for their safety as activists. Out of fear that they would be harmed while protesting, targeted by police, or imprisoned for their political work, their families behaved in unsupportive ways. Withholding support took the form of refusing to watch their children, mocking the means of protest, and silence around political issues they were fighting in support of.

Other couples described rejecting the term at first, or being “reluctant activists” firstly because of stigma from others for being politically active in ways that were not reformist, and secondly because of an assumption that they would be involved in movements simply because they are QWOC. *The College Sweethearts* shared that wanting to make change for them initially was conceptualized in a way that their parents encouraged, going about making change in reformist ways – meaning working within established systems and resisting in ways those systems would allow for. In this way, defining themselves as an activist was a shift away from reform – making change within the system – and a move towards radicalism – recognizing that the systems are broken and were not designed for QWOC to find liberation within them. The couples described different moments that radicalized them. For some, radical politics were just a part of their upbringing – such as *The Choose Yous* and *The First Generation Gems*. For others, realizing that reform would be too slow to address the issues that were impacting their

communities immediately like *The College Sweethearts* and *The Clergy Mamas* was their moment of radicalization. Additionally, connecting one identity development, for example queerness, to another, like race, after a major event – such as the death of Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown – radicalized them. This was the case for *The Long Distance Liberators*. Alex and Raven described realizing the similarities between threats to the survival for queer people and people of color. Identifying as both, they felt moved to action.

Activism as an identity that developed for the couples over time reminded me of many other identity development models for aspects of identity. Linear stage models of racial identity development were some of the earliest identity development models I encountered as a student. Cross (1971), Nadal (2009), and Berry (2005) developed stage models of Black, Pilipino, and Ethnic minority identities living in the United States respectively. Major criticisms of these models are that they all supported a final stage of racially marginalized folks learning to integrate dominant racial experiences with their own, becoming comfortable with dominant ideals and their own racial groups. Whiteness was not named in these discussions of “dominant culture”. Furthermore, these models ignored the violent legacies of colonization, genocide, American apartheid, and White Supremacy that define dominant culture in America. Moreover, they ignored the influence folks of color have had on creating and maintaining culture in America – positioning people of color as consumers of dominant culture rather than producers of American culture. While people of color do need to learn how to navigate dominant culture – White supremacist capitalist patriarchy - in order to survive, integrating these ideals should not be a goal of their identity development. Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) presented a continuum model of biracial identity that seems more fitting for marginalized racial identity experiences more broadly, describing it as a process that is constantly negotiated internally, in social

contexts, and in family systems. This continuum model mirrors the way the couples described their activist identity. They reported making sense of using the term ‘activist’ for themselves, negotiating that identity in organizing spaces, and intergenerationally within their families.

The couples I interviewed also defined activism in ways that departed from the direct action front line protesting that often comes to mind when we hear the word. Overwhelmingly, activism was defined by the couples as any action intending to change or disrupt White supremacist patriarchal capitalist systems of power in order to build a more just world. They described these actions as various things – from queering Easter services like *The Clergy Mamas* to continuing the legacy of Freedom Schools like *The Scholar Activists*. The emphasis on activism as action echoed in these words from Raven of *The Long Distance Liberators*:

I talk to people and they'll be like I'm an activist and it'll just be like just thoughts! Like "I'm a very Progressive thinker". But I think of activism as the work like it's a verb you know? The verb doesn't look one way but you have to be doing.

Unlike Battle and Harris (2013), I did not set predefined parameters around how I was defining political activism before my study. Instead I allowed couples to self-define as activists and constructed a definition for the identity from their own words and experiences. Kan and Heath (2006) explored politically active couples, but only looked at voting trends. Moreover, they did not include QWOC in their sample. The definition of activism as challenging status quo and active in the experience of revolutionships seems to be birthed out of lived experiences of being queer, not male, and a racialized person. When nearly no visible aspect of your identity is privileged, reforming existing systems seems an unlikely way to make any impactful stride toward justice. This leads QWOC to look beyond voting to make political change and embrace more radical methods of bringing about change.

### *Unique Strengths*

The third component of Revolutionships are the unique strengths the couples I interviewed reported. These strengths emerged in three main areas which became subthemes: experiencing their relationship as a safe spot, growing together around their social justice politics, and intentionality around communication. The first area – experiencing their relationship as a safe spot – was discussed by each of the couples I interviewed. This experience was described using different phrase by each couple. *The First Generation Gems* for example called their relationship a “safe pocket”. *The Scholar Activists* called their relationship “rejuvenation room”. *The Choose Yous* described their relationship as a free space. All of these ways of describing the relationships these couples have created speak to them experiencing their relationships as safe havens away from the impact of identity-based oppression and the burnout that often occurs within organizing. This subtheme speaks to the ways their relationships insulated them from external stress tied to oppression – such as being called names on the street like *The College Sweethearts* described. Their relationships also insulate them from the stress that comes along with participating in movements for liberation – such as reminding one another to take breaks for their health like the *Clergy Mamas*. This subtheme is additionally defined by the couples experiencing their relationship as a buffer to the impact of microaggressions, direct violence, and legislation that could potentially roll back their rights and protection. An example of this is the support from one another the couples described after the 2016 presidential election.

The couples I interviewed describing experiencing their relationships as safe spots is consistent with other studies that have specifically explored health benefits of social support from intimate partners. For example, Cohen and Willis (1985) conducted one of the earliest studies on buffers to stress in marriages and concluded that the effects of stress on depressive

symptoms were less for respondents who reported high levels of social support from their spouses. This finding became known as the stress-buffer hypothesis, that having a socially supportive partner could actually have stress reducing health benefits (Cranford, 2004). The revolutionships add to the stress-buffer hypothesis in three important ways. Firstly, previous studies have been quantitative and have used a survey format (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Clavel, Cutrona, & Russell, 2017). With the dyadic interviews I conducted, feedback from both partners were included and described in rich detail. Secondly, there have been no stress-buffer hypothesis studies that have included QWOC couples. Therefore, the experiences of these six couples would not have initially been conceived of by the hypothesis, but their experiences show that it in fact rings true for them as well. Lastly, the revolutionships add that stress related to factors other than depression too feel alleviated by their “safe spots”, supportive intimate relationships. This builds on the stress-buffer hypothesis to include oppression related stress, stress related to organizing, and family of origin stress.

The second unique strength of revolutionships was the ways in which the couples described growing together around their social justice politics through their relationships. This strength highlighted the political influence each partner had on the growth of the other. *The College Sweethearts* described this strength through their discussion of the interconnectedness of their growth together. Every way that Summer grew in her organizing efforts for her tribe helped Ashley get better in her understanding of change outside of reform. Similarly, *The First Generation* Gems expanded on this subtheme of growing together through describing how differences in their identities helped them understand intersectionality in action and being an ally for identities outside of the ones they hold personally. *The Long Distance Liberators* added to this strength, discussing the ways that they grew into an intersectional lens through

understanding each other's racial and queer identity development. This strength of revolutionships shifted the couples from liberal political understandings to radical liberationist politics. Moreover, it underscores how interconnected their loving each other is to their political growth, similar to the Zapatista couple in the Gonzales Castillo case study (2017). Loving each other allowed for them to deeply feel committed to movements that were not directly connected to their own oppression, becoming a rich space for coalition and allyship.

Lastly, the third unique strength of revolutionships is the intentionality about communication within the relationship. Some of the couples used the same terminology and words when discussing their communication with one another and how it maintains their relationship. "Intentional" was a word that recurred across interviews. This I interpreted as effort, deliberateness, and thoughtfulness around communication for these couples. Communication for the couples I interviewed for this project was not something that they passively engaged in. Instead, they named being deliberate about talking and listening to one another as a factor in maintaining their relationship. They seemed to apply similar tactics to communicating as a couple as they did to organizing.

Communicating as an active and thoughtful process for queer women in intimate relationships is a strength that has been captured by other studies as well. Earlier studies on queer women couples reported that similar gender socialization experiences among partners increases understanding in the relationship (Ossana, 2000) and contributes to emotional connectedness (Scrivner & Eldridge, 1995). Similar studies have also concluded that queer women couples are effective at conflict resolution and empathic attunement to one another, because of this intentionality around communicating and report an increased satisfaction in their relationship as a result (Connolly & Sicpla, 2005). Additionally, queer women couples report high relational

commitment, low frequency of abusive behaviors, and high sexual satisfaction within their relationships (Bryant & Demian, 1994). As *the Scholar Activists* processed how at times, they felt too intentional about communicating, wanting to make sure they are not being abusive or toxic to one another, this strength of queer women relationships is evident. Revolutionships add to these studies that QWOC activist couples have these strengths internally, and also in organizing spaces. Further, they use these principles to design community spaces that are supportive and affirming of QWOC, such as the trans women of color inclusive Eater service *The Clergy Mamas* organized or the community spaces *The Choose Yous* held.

#### *Unique Challenge: The Gaze*

The final component of revolutionships is defined by the unique challenge QWOC activist couples face: the gaze. The gaze highlights the impact visibility as both activists and queer women of color have on the couples' relationships as well as their political work. Cassidy of *The Scholar Activists* used the phrase "the gaze" to describe this experience and it seemed the most fitting description of the hypervisibility caused by their identities, activism, and relationship. Each couple talked about being hypervisible for being queer women of color in a relationship with another queer woman of color and also for their movement work. This hypervisibility impacted each couple differently but added a unique adversity to them that other couples may not experience. Firstly, the gaze impacted their activism, with one partner feeling called to be present while the other was organizing, for fear of being erased or somehow delegitimized as a couple. The gaze also caused the couples to feel the need to evoke each other to avoid erasure of their partner and acknowledge their relationship even when the other is not there to combat the erasure. Secondly, their relationship seemed to make their activism higher

profile, with people looking to them as a “power couple” that would change the societal ills in their area.

At the same time, the gaze came with moments that may be seen as admiration from others, but the couples experienced this as pressure. For example, *The Clergy Mamas* discussed being described as “#Goals” by others, which although meant as a compliment, felt like pressure for them to succeed as a couple, or like their relationship was abnormal in some way. Imani explained how the gaze made them abnormal by emphasizing every little thing they do – such as grocery shopping and paying bills – and considering it “exceptional” because they are a QWOC couple. Although people may think this is encouraging, it made them feel on display or as if their relationship was not being taken seriously. This speaks again to the paradox of oppression in that their relationship is not taken seriously – because they are queer women – and is also praised for things that other couples are not praised for. Balancing erasure while managing hypervisibility is an experience caused by the couples being activists, QWOC, and partnered with another QWOC activist. Another challenge with this paradox of oppression was the unpacking of power when they are called “power couples”. Despite all of the organizing efforts and change their work has brought about, they still contended with the very felt impact of systemic oppression queer people, people of color, and women experience. The couples expressed having very little systemic power, privilege, or power to exert dominance or change in society, yet they were being looked at to do so. They were looked down upon as queer couples while simultaneously looked at as power couples who could change the very oppressions that they were experiencing.

#### Clinical Implications: POWER Model

Through describing the experiences of QWOC activist couples – an experience I termed revolutionships – my goal was to begin to form a model that therapists could use to work with



QWOC couples. Clinical conceptualizations have made improvements in recognizing the complexities that make working with queer couples different than working with straight couples (Addison & Coolhart, 2015). However, basic understandings of QWOC couples remain absent, causing an absence in approaches to working with them clinically as well. Revolutionships not only gave me a framework of understanding QWOC couples, but because they deeply understand and resist oppression through their activism, they also provided me with much insight into what would be needed from therapists to effect change in their relationships and provide support.

After gaining a rich understanding of revolutionships through the interviews I conducted with the six QWOC couples, I started to draw on their comments about therapy and my dissertation diary entries to outline this model for therapists that could be effective in working with them. Here I aim to go beyond the typical calls for more multicultural competence training for therapists or basic understandings of how revolutionships are different from other relationships – which is much needed and what I hope I accomplished in the first half of this chapter – but move towards a concrete activist informed model therapists can use. This model is of course informed by my theory of change and theoretical approach to this project – Black Feminist Narrative therapy, but also by activism itself. Stories are my natural way of conceptualizing problems and heavily informs the way I merged Black Feminist thought and Narrative Family Therapy for this project and in my own practice. Narrative Therapy speaks to my understanding of change through story and Black Feminist thought adds the complex structural, personal, and political dimensions of power that shape how these stories are told - and the sociopolitical climate they form into Narrative Therapy. Additionally, Black feminism has therapeutic implications by calling for the end to systems that cause trauma and limit personal

power. This model is activist informed in the way that I developed it through analyzing my interviews with the revolutionship couples. Further, this model calls for therapists to not only be culturally aware by processing their own social locations in relation to others, but to put this awareness into action – addressing social justice in and beyond the therapy room.

I believe that change occurs when we are empowered to narrate our life experiences for ourselves, realizing that we are solutions - not problems. Narrating for ourselves also allows us to discover alternatives to the stories we have always accepted as unchangeable truths. It is in these alternatives that we release parts of ourselves that are subjugated in roles we are rehearsed in and can reauthor ourselves for ourselves. I see this as applicable to revolutionships and a guiding principle for supporting them in therapy, as the partners are navigating multiple subjugated identities and fighting the systems that subjugate them. Black Feminism adds to Narrative Family Therapy that our communication styles are not only truths, but truths that have been shaped by our gendered, racial, sexual, and cultural experiences.

Feminist therapy holds that change in not only personal life, but also in societal institutions is a goal of therapy (Sharf, 2008). Recognizing how life circumstances and conditions in which people live directly influence their presenting symptoms is central to feminist therapy in the way that the therapist works with folks to identify how they are being impacted (Sharf, 2008). This means that while people experience problems personally, problems are in fact symptoms of larger systemic ills such as patriarchy (Sharf, 2008). Black feminism provides a framework to address concerns that not only impact folks personally, but that many who live at the intersections and margins of societies can benefit from. It adds multiplicity to the dichotomies of knowing in Narrative Therapy and subverts binaries and dichotomies of identities

pervasive in hegemonic systems of oppression allowing space for folks to define themselves for themselves.

Rooted in Black Feminist Narrative therapy as my guiding change framework, notes I took in my dissertation diary during this project, and the words of the couples I interviewed, I offer the POWER model for working with QWOC activist couples. Power is a focus of Narrative Therapy, Feminism, and the movements for liberation the participants are engaged in across the country. This word echoed so much in the interviews, analysis, and in my own theory of change that I saw it fitting as an acronym for my five suggested implications for clinical work with revolutionships. “P” represents a shared political language. “O” represents ongoing organizing and leaning into the feminist principle of the personal is political. “W” represents work in sessions. “E” represents expanding your relational intersectional lens as a clinician (Addison & Coolhart, 2015). Lastly, “R” represents religious and spiritual components. Here, I will expand on my conceptualizations of each of these suggestions for couples therapy with revolutionships and provide some examples of guiding questions therapists can ask in session to support QWOC and facilitate change.

### *Political language*

Each time I triangulated on this project, whether it was meetings with my advisor or presenting my progress to date for classes I was invited to guest lecture in, I became increasingly aware of how I and my participants shared a political language. While interviewing *The Choose Yous*, I noticed myself saying things like “I know what you mean, but can you clarify for when I transcribe?” Similarly, others would say “the election” – referencing the 2016 election of Donald Trump – as a shorthand that we all understood, but did not explicitly name. We rattled off cities

and places such as Baltimore, Ferguson, and Palestine – again as shorthand for mass movements for liberation or state sanctioned violence that have occurred there. As I have discussed, language holds much meaning in Black feminist narrative therapy. Freedman and Combs (1996) highlight how the way we talk about things allows for us to know – or not know – things. Drawing on this, organizers know struggles because we create language together in the resistance to know them in new ways. We are constantly challenging dominant narratives around movements that seek to paint them in ways that do not serve social justice. For example, after the murder of Freddie Gray by Baltimore Police, organizers refer to the protest as the Baltimore Uprisings, as opposed to the Freddie Gray Riots – which is how many media sources covered the event.

At first, I attempted to move away from ‘struggle slang’, but in synthesizing this project and re-reading my dissertation diary entries, I now believe that this is an important part of building trust, safety, and connection with QWOC activists. I believe that I was able to stay in the story of their relationships with the couples because we had this shared political language. Knowing these ‘struggle slang’ references made me a comrade to the couples I interviewed – someone who is safe not just because of our shared social identities, but because I saw these identities as political in similar ways as them. This is not to say that I did not have questions about words they used or political movements they were a part of, but because I knew some, I was able to work with them on an understanding of language I was unfamiliar with, such as the on-campus movements of *The Long Distance Liberators*. I take from this that in therapy sessions with QWOC activist couples, a shared political vocabulary is necessary to building rapport with the couple.

This also means that in sessions, therapists have to be inquisitive about what words mean for QWOC activists and why they choose to use the language they do to narrate experiences.

Asking questions around this makes room for QWOC activists to describe events in their own experiences, rather than based on how they identify socially or politically. Further, it allows for them to use language from the past and language that they create to construct identities as queer women, allowing for the creation of a rhetoric of agency and self-definition, as described by Pough (2004). An example of this is Qamar of *The First Generation Gems* who identifies as “woman +”. This is a gender identity I was totally unaware of before interviewing them, but I asked questions in an experience-oriented way that allowed for self-definition. The power that comes from self-defining alone has been heavily echoed in Black Feminist literature (Lorde, 1984; Jordan, 2005). I add here that self-definition is made possible first through language, followed by gaining an understanding of identity politics. Therapists working with QWOC activist couples have to make this self-definition process relational, developing shared understandings in order to build a rapport, but also to help both partners understand each other – as words are not universal metaphors but are instead culturally bound symbols. The following are three examples of questions a therapist might ask in order to address political language in session:

*I know you filled out our demographics form, but I would like for you to share the parts of your experience that I should know in working with you.*

*I've heard you say “45” several times, and I think you are referring to Trump. Can we talk about what that election was like for you?*

*When you explained that, the word I would use to describe it would be “ableism”. How you are defining and experiencing it?*

## *Organizing*

The QWOC activist couples I interviewed participate in politics and political struggles for liberation because they know the material conditions of their lives depend on it. Even when they are not directly impacted by an issue of injustice, they see they very real ways their communities are interconnected with others, and so too is their freedom. They are always aware of the current revolutions and have ears out for revolutions to come. They assess the differences among themselves, movements, and communities in order to work in solidarity on a political as well as intimate level. The personal is truly political for revolutionships, meaning that they make relational choices that are consistent with their radical liberatory politics. Their relational selves and personal lives are inseparable from their politics. Raven from *The Long-Distance Liberators* demonstrated this when she shared:

There are people who have those stated differences who are in relationship and I could never do that. Like I am so confused what do you talk about? Like I'm not trying to take that for granted but people are just like “we don't talk about politics” where I'm like I could never! I *am* politics!

Therefore, to show QWOC activist couples that you are invested in their lives and willing to build a therapeutic relationship, therapists should be aware of the current struggles for liberation related to the couples. Being aware of historical movements that facilitated equity for women of color and LGBT folks is also necessary. This awareness of historic and current movements evidences an investment in the lived realities of QWOC. Moreover, it will likely be perceived as understanding the extent to which the matrix of oppression of racism, classism, queerphobia, and sexism shapes the intimate struggles they have as a couple and as individuals. This matrix must be considered at all times, and any couple solution that is to be worked for in

sessions must be sensitive to it. I think of organizing as yet another part of their identity that therapists must be mindful to not shut out of the therapy room. Similar to other oppressed social identities, they should not be made to explain these struggles as well. I do not mean by this that a therapist should not ask questions about movements – in fact I encourage that in this approach as it is collaborative and brings their work into the room. What I mean is that therapists should have a broad idea of the ongoing organizing and ask intersectional process questions about the movement – as this makes the therapist an ally in the struggle at least, and a co-conspirator in the struggle at best. Here are three suggestions for how to incorporate organizing into the therapeutic process:

*I heard about that protest in support of DREAMers downtown. Were you there?*

*I am familiar with the call for the Chancellor to resign, but am not sure what led up to that. Are you?*

*How are the two of you dealing with the upcoming presidential election? I know that last one was hard for you both and impacted your relationship.*

#### *Work in session*

When I was first going to [my therapist] I was like dead depressed. Like I was, wasn't leaving my house. Like I would get up because [Kenya] was leaving and then that was it like get my kids back home and I wasn't doing nothing. But I would get up to go to therapy and her only thing was like, just to give me homework. Like sis, this was it! Like making it here was all I was getting done! This was it! So like if I'm not getting it done in here like I'm not getting it done. So I just didn't really feel like she understood how deep the shit was.

These words from Niecy of *The Choose Yous* capture my thoughts around working in sessions with QWOC couples who are engaged in political activism. There are two main components of working in sessions that I feel are important when doing therapy with QWOC activist couples. First, the effort it takes for them to take time for wellbeing is immense and should be situated within the context of their lives. It is work for QWOC to take care of themselves and to echo Audre Lorde (Lorde, 1982), self-preservation for QWOC is an act of political warfare. When Niecy shares that this “shit is deep”, she is not only referring to the depression she is experiencing, but to what it takes for her step away from organizing and the barriers to therapy that make it difficult to actually show up. Historical hurt and exclusion from care professionals is also deep for QWOC. In my personal experience, I have watched friends function through anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and other rational responses to the onslaught of injustice we experience in order to raise children, go to work, or organize an action. They are emotionally, mentally, and physically taxed and do not find time for their own health and wellbeing until they collapse – either from physical health crises like Imani of *The Clergy Mamas* or from mental health crises like Niecy described post Ferguson. I even wrote about my own struggles in my dissertation diary, because my struggles felt so bound to this project. To take time for attentiveness to ourselves as humans means more and takes more effort than other folks who have not been as impacted by the weight of oppressions. Recognizing that this time they have devoted to themselves is significant is meaningful to QWOC, and doubly so when they coordinate to both engage in healing together.

Secondly, QWOC activist couples are typically used to having intense, challenging conversations. They are often able to go to hard places and stay present. No one flees or retreats, both partners lean into the toughness, willing to do the work. I am still not sure if this develops



as a result of growing as a political organizer, or if it is a skill that leads them to organizing in the first place. Either way, they are capable and willing to do the work of communicating intentionally in order to repair. As therapists working with revolutionships, keep this in mind and plan for sessions to be active and engaging. One of the couples I currently see in therapy – for example – stated that they do not want to come in for “what was that like for you” sessions and have ended therapy in the past when sessions did not feel like “work”. Interventions do not have to be elaborate, but purposeful and useful in the moment – similar to interventions on the ground during direct actions. I envision these interventions as me taking the bullhorn from the organizer and facilitating work in sessions. They do not have to be the facilitator or organizer in the session, so in this way it is a rest, but they will still use their strengths to be intensely present and participatory. The pressure to direct the action in the session can rest with me – or at least be shared – to allow for this. I also find myself reframing what “work” looks like for QWOC couples in sessions, allowing room for rest to be considered necessary work. For example, a meditation or breathing exercise is “work”, but restful and restorative. Writing activities that allow them to put words to their experiences, asking questions that externalize the problem, art therapy interventions such as collaging, and couples therapy games are all interventions I have had success with in therapy with QWOC activist couples. Here are some ways I have presented activities in session:

*I know the two of you getting here together today was not easy...*

*Today I was hoping we could try an activity to get us started...*

*If the two of you don't mind, this feels like a good place to do a writing activity...*

*Expand your relational intersectional lens*

To say that there is a paucity of literature addressing clinical assessment and conceptualization of QWOC couples within the field of Couple and Family therapy is an understatement. Adding the layer of political activism to the issues involved in therapy for QWOC, I struggle to find anything that would adequately address the concerns of revolutionships. Only one therapeutic lens stands out in the recent strides therapy has made to be inclusive and affirming of queer couples that seems applicable here – the relational intersectional lens (Addison & Coolhart, 2015). The relational intersectional lens proposed taking into account multiple axes of identity, oppression, and power and how they interrelate for the couple and in sessions with the therapist. Drawing on the works of Crenshaw (1991) and Falicov (2003), Addison and Coolhart (2015) began to outline what I call an orientation to therapy with queer couples.

As opposed to outlining a manualized intervention focused therapeutic approach, they emphasized that the relational intersectional lens is a way of thinking and being in therapeutic relationship with queer couples. This way of being has several guiding values. Firstly, the relational intersectional lens values the multidimensionality of identities and the social context in which they are imbedded. What makes this meaningful to me and such an important connection to revolutionships is that privilege and oppression are not universal experiences but are instead context specific and inextricably bound to our other identities. The way antiblackness operates – and therefore the way it is resisted – looks different across contexts and any given Black person's experience of antiblack racism is informed and modified by their other identities. For example, misogynoir is the specific antiblack misogyny Black women and femmes experience. Secondly, the relational intersectional lens values challenging assumptions that same gender partners from

different backgrounds will be operating from the same schemas related to queerness and intimate partnerships. Addison and Coolhart (2009) highlight the ways that each person's understanding of their gender and sexuality are shaped by their racial, religious, generational, ethnic, and other community norms. Lastly, the relational intersectional lens calls therapists to pay attention to the complexities of each individual's identities and how they cross with their partner and the therapist in session.

In keeping with the radical approaches to liberation the revolutionships employ, I aim to bring that energy into this aspect of my proposed model, expanding the relational intersectional lens. What revolutionships illustrate are the values of the relational intersectional lens applied to social movements. Here, I challenge therapists to expand their relational intersectional lenses by applying values from social movements for liberation to their therapeutic practices. I understand this to mean not just conceptualizing presenting problems through a relational intersectional lens outside of the therapy room, but to use it as your orientation to relational work in the room – situating yourself and each partner in relation to systems of privilege and oppression (Addison & Coolhart, 2015). Locating yourself in sessions through thoughtful self-disclosure, discussing systems of oppression by name, and naming difference and connection are ways I envision this happening in session.

Moreover, the participants spoke to the importance of identity when joining with a therapist, and what allows them to join when they have different identities than the therapist. *The College Sweethearts*, for example, discussed this:

Ashley: I think like number one is like finding a woman of color [therapist]. I think that challenge is like yeah! The Challenge is definitely finding a woman of color because it's really hard. Like we both did it separately like it took us so long to even find

someone who we thought would be in the demographic range of someone who can understand us and obviously it's not just women of color who can understand us but it's very important to feel that connection immediately.

Summer: yeah definitely. I think that's what we look for when we're looking for therapists or counselors to talk to we're like are they a woman of color? Are they supportive of the LGBT? And have like an understanding

Ashley: It's like do they understand where I'm coming from ... like there's so much that I don't have to explain ... that would be I mean that would be most perfect

Summer: yeah so yeah not feeling like there's someone who understands both like of our backgrounds or at least has I guess a little just a little bit of understanding where you're not like [sighs] "in 1492" [laughs] I'm not there to give you a history lesson you know.

Alvita of *The First Generation Gems* also adds to this:

I would hope that [a therapist would] understand that the relationship Dynamics especially through political activism and everything might not take the direction of something that you would have had a clinical study on [laughs]. Or like something that you have experienced before so it would be really important for the therapist themselves to be open to what they can learn [about us] and the people that they are dealing with in order to create something new because chances are we're going to be creating something new.

I take from these two quotes that while sharing identities with the therapist is preferable, having an understanding of their identities as political is equally as important. While they expect to not

have to explain their identities, they want to discuss them with their therapists – particularly when the therapists’ identities are different from their own.

What I also understand expanding the relational intersectional lens to mean is to go beyond attempting to integrate or include QWOC into spaces and systems that have marginalized them. Instead, imagine what it would mean to fundamentally transform therapy as a care practice – going to its roots. I see this as questioning barriers to therapy for QWOC, restructuring training and licensure practices to emphasize social justice, and seeking coalitional supervision of your therapy – all informed by the values the relational intersectional lens urges us to have. This way, we are not stopping at transforming ourselves in the therapy room as providers, but also the profession of therapy to give the most socially just support possible for QWOC couples. Given that all liberation is connected, this would create couple and family therapy services that would be more supportive of all. The following are three ways I have personally expanded my relational intersectional lens:

*Tabling at a Black Health Expo as a Black mental health provider who works at a practice that takes insurance and does sliding scale pricing*

*Facilitating free healing spaces for student and community activists*

*Brining awareness to microaggressions and accessibility issues at a family therapy conference, joined by other women of color therapists who shared these concerns*

### *Religion and spirituality*

I would really like therapist to know when working with queer women of color our traumas aren't void of our identities. Like a lot of trauma like it's just all wrapped up together ... and like even beyond that just like willing to look at my body and my

experiences like on a holistic level not just on the psychological level or physical level or what I manifest but also just like on a spiritual level.

These words from Devyn of *The Scholar Activists* speaks to my fifth and final implication for work with QWOC activist couples – religion and spirituality. Every couple I interviewed for this project discussed religion or spirituality as important forces for them. Believing in something larger than their embodied human experience seemed like the only thing at times that animated their activism. Similarly, a sense of spirituality weaved throughout their connections to one another as they talked about being committed to each other in ways that transcended physical, political, and emotional connections. For some, such as *The Clergy Mamas*, institutionalized practices of religion united them as a couple and was also a site of movement work for them. For others, like *the College Sweethearts* and *The Choose Yous*, ancestral reverence and indigenous traditions informed their work and partnerships. In understanding the principles that guide their politics, I found myself learning about how each revolutionship saw themselves as a part of a long legacy of liberationists – spiritually tethered to the past and fighting for futures. I am reminded of the words of Chicana warrior feminist Cherie Moraga (2015) here as I talk about spirituality as it is tied to liberation work. Moraga writes:

In the face of world wide misogynist atrocities and intimate violence, we cannot escape recurring self-doubts about the actual power of our acts of resistance against global patriarchy. I admit I have long days of doubt. Perhaps its my age, the knowledge of the lengthening list of sisters/compañeras who've passed, and the sense of my own diminishing years. As so many others have said before me, *I don't imagine I will live to see the revolution*. I smile at the arrogance of this: that we imagine that our work begins and ends with us. (pg. xxiii)

Here Moraga makes clear the spirituality of movement work. Revolutionaries add their love to this understanding of spirituality as well. They know that their love and work did not begin with them and will not end when their physical lives end. This intergenerational turn to spirituality is not new. Black folks in America, for example, have depended on religion and spirituality at times to cope with adversity and to maintain a sense of meaning for their lives in the midst of oppression (Moore & Madison-Colemore, 2005). Rootworkers, pastors, priests, and reverends also played key organizing roles in struggles for racial liberation in America. Therapists are becoming more aware of the resilience potential and positive impact religion holds for racially marginalized groups (Moore & Madison-Colemore, 2005). Queerness does not exclude folks from this reality. Spirituality and religious involvement should be explored with QWOC couples, as it could be an important way they make meaning of their political work, love, and lives. It is important for therapists to not assume “church hurt”, as the Black lesbians in Glass’s study reported their church communities as sources of support – everything from childcare to spiritual mentors. Therapists working with QWOC should invite the conversation around spiritual practices and explore how these practices might be sources of support for the couple. Here are some examples of ways this may be introduced in session:

*17 Ferguson protestors have been murdered since the Mike Brown protests and I imagine you two have been afraid and grieving. What spiritual values inform how you process grief and loss?*

*I have heard you mention “the ancestors” several times. Can we talk a little bit more about that?*

*Outside of your organizing community, have the two of you found a religious or spiritual community that supports you as a couple?*

### Challenges and Further Research

When discussing queerness, language seems to always be a limitation. Even within community, terminology and how we feel about certain labels can be a contentious conversation. For the purposes of this project, I chose to use the word “woman” in my recruitment materials and also in this write-up. Even though some folks who chose to participate in this project identify as “nonbinary femmes” or “women +”, I thought it was important to use woman as an inclusive gender category for people who currently do not experience moving through the world being gendered as men. All of the liberationists who participated in my project enthusiastically participated – even with the word “woman” on my recruitment materials. I interpreted this as them seeing “woman” similarly to the ways I understand it – not as a biological box, but an expansive gendered experience that folks who do not have social access to manhood experience. When recruiting for this project, I specifically chose to use the word “women” because there is essentially no body of literature on QWOC couples, especially QWOC activist couples. While I acknowledge that most of the research that does exist on queer men of color is problematic in that it mostly focuses on substance use and HIV treatment, there are at least scholars invested in exploring the dynamics of queer men of color relationally. We as QWOC don’t have any sources of research on our relational dynamics and I see this as a violence by omission that I hoped to begin to heal. I assume it is a very different experience to be in a queer men activist couple, or a queer couple where one partner is male. I absolutely believe these dynamics are important, but in my future research I would like to explore more of the “woman +” end of the gender spectrum in order to continue this healing.

Another challenge I ran into during this process was how I would de-identify the couples, given that certain details felt so necessary to talk about their activism. I talked with my



dissertation advisor several times about how to keep the impact of what each couple was engaged in while also protecting their privacy as much as possible. At times, their anonymity felt impossible, as their public profiles as activists grew as I was writing this dissertation. I heard my triangulators and mentors when they advised me that the couple's activism isn't the focus, rather their relationship is. In constructing a definition of revolutionships, however, I realized that their activism is not separate from their relationship; it is interwoven into the way they understand, establish, and maintain themselves as a couple. In this way, activism is not only a developmental identity or activity they engage in, but a relational process not separate from their relationship. A perfect example of this is Kenya and Niecy of *The Choose Yous*, or even the case study of the Zapatista couple Adela and Octavio (González Castillo, 2017). Both of these couples have a deep love for each other, but also for their people, the land, and the communities that keep each of them going. In the example of the Zapatista couple we also see how when the relationship ends, so too does the political work. The activism they engage in is an extension of their love and is relational. Even the ways each couple I interviewed had of naming the work that they do when I interviewed them felt as if it spoke to the activism as an element of their relationship. They did not frame it as an activity they engaged in – for example “we protect water on the weekends”. Instead, their activism was phrased as part of their relationships – “we take care of the water, the water will take care of us”. Seeing the land and the liberation work as inseparable from their relationships calls relational therapists to decolonize the way we think about relationships. Revolutionships are not floating relationships happening in a place; rather they are bound relationships happening with a place. This makes the specificity of their liberation work important to understanding them as a couple.

Related, I greatly underestimated my own impact on QWOC communities and just how many participants would be aware of my work going into this project. Some of the participants were up front about how they knew me – citing my podcast and blog. Others disclosed that they knew of my work after I began interviewing them. Still others shared after the interview that they decided to participate because mutual organizing friends told them I was “good peoples”. I worried how much they knew about my personal life from reading my blog or listening to my podcast, and how this may have impacted what they shared with me. As I reflect on their participation now, I realize that their being familiar with me made them comfortable to talk to me. As activists and organizers, threats to our safety are ever looming, so knowing who a trustworthy person is not only important to furthering the movement, but also for our own security. Being a queer woman of color myself and also actively involved in movements, participants trusted me with their stories, knowing I had just as much at risk. This consideration showed me that my work makes me just as visible as my participants, putting us in community as QWOC activists.

Material constraints were also a challenge to this project. Being a broke graduate student with limited funding for my dissertation project limited my ability to travel to places where the liberationists I interviewed lived and interview them in person. Instead, I had to conduct video calls via Skype and Zoom to interview most of the couples. I name this as a challenge to this project for several reasons. Firstly, I am studying relationality and the tangible impact organizing in their contexts have on their relationships; however, I had to do this at a distance. If I could have traveled to them, I believe the context specific data to each couple could have emerged differently. Similarly to what I discussed in regards to activism being a part of their relationship, space and place came up in the interviews often. I would have liked to gather more information

about place as it connected to their work and relationships. Additionally, being able to travel may have made it more possible to recruit trans women of color, being in spaces with them where they feel most comfortable and supported. Also, there is a dearth of scholarship on QWOC and those of us who could desire to do this work and who would also be good at it – approaching it through a intersectional Black feminist lens – are not supported by institutions to do it.

Moreover, I name financial support as a challenge to this project because this was a community project that could have been more impactful for the participants had I had resources to connect them to one another. Perhaps more than I had realized before actually conducting interviews, this dissertation project put QWOC activist couples who were so often the only ones in their corners of the country in community with one another and myself. The liberationists I interviewed would invite me to hang out, to family dinners, to wherever they were, and wanted to know the other couples I had talked to. Even though we – QWOC – in the abstract know that we are numerous, we still live these day-to-day realities where we are so often the only visible ones. For the couples I interviewed to know that I interviewed five other couples besides them was amazing to them. *The Clergy Mamas* shared how important they felt connecting to other QWOC activist couples could be for envisioning their future as a couple too, sharing “we’ve been doing this for four minutes, maybe we could meet people who’ve been doing this for four days”.

Connecting as a revolutionship community could not only have personal implications, but relational ones as well, providing each couple with a possibility model. Further, it links the legacy of QWOC organizing and brilliance as it is happening, which could possibly provide much needed support to grassroots movements for liberation. I am reminded here of the Mobile Homecoming project out of Durham, North Carolina (Mobile Homecoming). Started by another

revolutionship, liberationists Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Roxanne Wallace, Mobile Homecoming functions as an intergenerational experiential archive on wheels that seeks to amplify generations of Black queer brilliance. Their aim was to create an intergenerational community of love and support throughout the United States through hosting events, retreats, dances, and ceremonies that honored ancestors (Mobile Homecoming). For queer women of color who often learn of one another through tragedy or after we have died, connections like those made through the Mobile Homecoming project are world changing. Mobile Homecoming too struggles to have consistent funding to make these connections possible and maintain the mobile archive. In the future with funding, I would like to make these connections possible through focus groups. In this way, the research project itself can be part of building QWOC community and archiving the experiences of QWOC activist couples.

In the future I also see this project expanding beyond the United States and into transnational contexts. As I was working on this study, I learned of a QWOC couple, two Black queer women, who were at the core of organizing Jamaica's first LGBT pride parade this year. I also learned of Afro-Latinx Brazilian women doing anti-rape organizing. I also know of Palestinian lesbian activists who have organized direct actions in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter and the resistance to the border wall. These are just examples I can name, knowing that there are countless unnamed revolutionships beyond the borders of the United States. For further research I would like to explore how transnational revolutionships change or confirm the experience of QWOC activist couples in the United States and also how the POWER model might be useful. I would still use a Black feminist narrative framework as Black feminism and story-as-method have always been transnational theories.

I think about the ways that the West keeps trying to create the standards that get exported and translated throughout the world for care, without doing the work to talk to those most impacted to make these approaches culturally attuned. Decolonial approaches to this exist – here I am thinking of Himika Bhattacharya’s project of narrating the ways Dalit women in Lahaul, India define love and violence while contesting the state and caste (Bhattacharya, 2017). If I go to the Dalit, Third World, Black, and Indigenous Queer women of the world, I can begin to build a transnationally informed model for couples therapy with QWOC. I – as well as the liberationists I interviewed for this project - see movements as globally fought, but contextually specific. Therefore, this model cannot just be based on U.S. activists. Further, family and relationality for people of color often crosses borders. *The First Generation Gems* made clear how international problems become really close when you start to look at the lives of Queer women of color. Citizenship, state, and nationality are not just context; it’s the substance of our lives and relationships. Being a first generation American is more than demographic that you fill out on a form. It is a whole experience that situates your family in multiple countries. Saying that one of the couples I interviewed is ‘1st generation’ means something, particularly at this time when Trump is instituting Muslim bans and their parents are Muslims who are not citizens. Knowing how to support them as a couple means testing the POWER model in spaces beyond the borders of the United States as well.

### Strengths of this Study

Perhaps the most obvious strength of my study was my ability to get such forthcoming and detailed responses from the QWOC activist couples I interviewed. As I described when introducing the couples, many of them knew of me either from my podcast or my organizing

work. Initially I thought of this as a possible conflict but reflecting now, I realize that their knowing my work and seeing me as a sibling in the struggle is what allowed me to be a researcher they could talk to. They risked greatly sharing with me things they had done as organizers because they knew that I too had risked. They spoke candidly about maintaining their relationships because I speak openly about my own experiences in relationships on my podcast. Existing works in the field of marriage and family therapy related to QWOC discusses their lived experiences without incorporating their expertise on their own lives and is often conducted by researchers who do not identify as queer women of color (Battle & Harris, 2013; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Wilson, et al., 2011). Identifying with the community, then, is a methodological strength that allowed me to contribute meaningfully to the literature on QWOC couples. I also believe that identifying with the community myself holds me accountable to my research in a credible way, as this is not a community I will leave at the end of this project. I am still accountable to my participants and to myself.

Additionally, with this project I interviewed liberationists while they were presently engaged in political activism. The movements that they were participating in are also ongoing, making my study different from those that ask participants to recollect their experiences organizing years prior. This timeliness allowed for much needed reflection for the participants and rich, thick descriptions of their experiences for me to distill into themes, and eventually the theory of revolutionships. It also provided information that I used to create the POWER model, providing therapists information to create therapeutic alliances and environments with QWOC as they need it in the present sociopolitical moment.

Lastly, my congruence with Black Feminist narrative theory in this qualitative research project is a strength of this study. I take this to mean that I held firmly to the theories that I

stated would underline this project, and produced a work that is reflective of those theories. One way that I remained congruent with Black feminist narrative in this project was choosing to make myself seen in my work – rejecting objectivity and locating myself in relation to the couples I interviewed. Conducting research is not immune to colonial practices of extraction and lookism. It is saturated with narratives of distance between researcher and researched and that being some measure of good research. It has at its core the assumption that research is meant for reporting out. With this project I reported in, being a member of both of my audiences – QWOC activists and relational therapists. I aimed for this research project to be a grounded theory project that would be accessible to all the communities I am a part of. Secondly, I was as transparent as I could be about the project as I conducted it and my own experiences of doing the research. I triangulated with my advisor and presented to peers on several occasions as I attempted to construct a theory and the POWER model.

### Conclusion

My dissertation project aimed to adopt an intersectional theoretical approach to explore the experience of QWOC in romantic relationships while participating in political activism. I hoped to produce a model for couples therapy that is tied to Black feminist politics of social change to create healing environments for QWOC. My research aims to depart from the theories on social identity within family therapy that present identity dimensions (race, class, gender, etc.) as independent and construct them as interconnected to contextualize the experiences of QWOC. I wanted to write a dissertation that would not only address a gap in couples therapy literature, but one that would also be politically relevant. Contributing the POWER model equips relational therapists with a starting point in addressing issues faced by QWOC couples. It also calls for

therapists to be vulnerable, real, and human in the room – using their own subjectivity and social locations to hold the experiences of those contending with systems of oppression. This model also invites therapists into conceptualizing relational therapy as activism – an action with the capacity to challenge hegemonic ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and class in an effort to move towards socially just realities. Listening to the stories the liberationists described of continuing work to build a culturally changed society while loving one another inspired me.

This project was the hope that I wanted to read about loving on the margins, but could not find. I excitedly transcribed the interviews and worked to distill all that I gathered from them into explaining Revolutionships so that that hope could be there for the next person who seeks it. In some way, I hope this study and model will begin to lessen the marginalization experienced by QWOC, both in therapeutic settings and beyond. All liberation is bound together. Therefore, it is too my hope that this exploration and model have radical liberatory implications for all marginalized folks seeking refuge from threats to their survival. Moreover, when we address the concerns of the most marginalized, transformation that frees us all in the process is possible. Therefore, other couples can use the strengths of revolutionships to sustain their own relationships. Whether we experience privilege or oppression due to systems of oppression, we are all impacted by it and so too are our relational dynamics. Therapists working with couples who are not QWOC couples can find the POWER model useful in their work to address the ways in which these dynamics are informing couple dynamics. While the liberatory implications for this project do not end in the therapy room – as societal transformation is needed to meaningfully address oppression – they can start there. It is imperative for therapists to be prepared to engage in this radical healing with clients on the margins. The movement needs therapists, and therapists need the movement.



## Appendix A

### Consent Form



### **SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY**

#### **DEPARTMENT OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY DAVID B. FALK COLLEGE OF SPORT AND HUMAN DYNAMICS**

**Project Title-** Experiences of Queer Women of Color Maintaining Romantic Relationships while engaged in Political Activism

My name is Montinique McEachern and I am a doctoral candidate in Marriage and Family Therapy at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Deb Coolhart, my faculty advisor, will be assisting me in the research. Involvement in the study is completely voluntary, so you may choose to participate and/or withdraw at any time if desired. Please feel free to ask me any questions about the research or the study.

#### **Background/Purpose:**

You and your partner are being asked to participate in this study because you have experience maintaining a romantic relationship with your partner while also participating in political movements for liberation. The purpose of the study is to better understand the impact of political activism on romantic relationships between queer women of color. Through interviews with you and your partner, this research study will explore these experiences. Approximately six couples will be recruited for this study. This is a descriptive research study and not a medical or psychological treatment study. You will only be asked to describe your experiences; you will *not* be provided any medical or psychological treatment.

#### **Procedures:**

If you choose to participate, you and your partner will be asked to complete a verbal interview where you will be asked questions regarding your experiences of political activism and maintaining the relationship between you and your partner. Your responses would be audiotaped for the purpose of data analysis. This will take approximately one hour of your time. The recordings will be transcribed and coded. Portions of the transcriptions will be used for presentations, publications, and my doctoral dissertation though all identifying information will

be changed. The recordings will be retained until data analysis is complete (no more than one year after participation) and they will then be erased.

### **Confidentiality:**

All information will be kept *confidential*. I, Montinique McEachern (investigator), and my dissertation advisor Dr. Deb Coolhart will have access to the recordings. I will assign a number to your responses, and only my advisor (Deb Coolhart) and I will have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant. Also, in any articles I write, my dissertation, or any presentations that I make, I will use a made-up name for you and I will change details about where you work, where you live, and other details that may make you identifiable.

We will keep all data as confidential as possible, with the exception of certain information that we must report for legal or ethical reasons such as child abuse and/or intent to harm self or others. The researcher is not immune to legal subpoena about illegal activities. Although it is very unlikely, if law enforcement officials asked to see my data, I would have to give it to them.

### **Risks:**

It is possible that you may experience discomfort in relating your relationship experiences and experiences with political activism. This risk is minimized by your responses being voluntary, for example, only sharing as much information as you are comfortable disclosing. I will remind you in the interview to only share as much information about your activism as you are comfortable sharing. If you experience discomfort while completing the interview or in response to participation in this project you may contact the Couple and Family Therapy Center to engage in therapy (for no fee) at 315-443-3023 or, for more urgent distress, you may call Contact, the crisis hotline, at 315-251-0600. If these resources are not accessible to you due to your geographic location, the investigator will assist you in finding similar services in your area. If you do not want to take part in the study, you have the right to refuse without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

### **Benefits:**

You may not receive any direct benefit from this study. You will have the space to discuss your experiences, possibly producing feelings of validation and a platform to be heard. It is my hope that the information gathered in this study will provide a narrative of love and resistance for Queer women of color that will benefit future QWOC couples. Empirical findings will contribute to knowledge of the specific experiences of queer and trans women of color. More specifically, the findings from this project will inform development of clinical implications for providing affirmative therapy to lesbian, bisexual, and trans women of color and their partners; and to educate helping professionals and general people about tangible ways in which they can support queer women of color.

### **Contact Information:**

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, contact the investigator, Montinique McEachern, at 315-748-5389 or [mdmceach@syr.edu](mailto:mdmceach@syr.edu). If you have any questions

about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, or if you cannot reach the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

All of my questions have been answered, I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_ I agree to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_ I do not agree to be audio recorded.

---

Signature of participant

Date

Printed name of participant

Signature of researcher

Date

Printed name of researcher

## Appendix B

## Demographics Form

- A. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Race: \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
- E. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
- F. Annual household income: \_\_\_\_\_
- G. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
- H. Highest level of formal education obtained:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- I. How would you describe your Sexual Orientation:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- J. Do you have a spiritual or religious identity that you would like to list here:  
\_\_\_\_\_
- K. Do you have children? \_\_Y \_\_N If So, how many: \_\_\_\_\_
- L. Are you currently employed: \_\_Y \_\_N
- M. Do you identify as a person with a disability? \_\_Y \_\_N
- N. Were you born somewhere other than the United States? \_\_Y \_\_N If yes,  
where?

## Appendix C



**ARE YOU A TRANS, LESBIAN,  
BISEXUAL, OR QUEER WOMAN OF  
COLOR (QWOC) ACTIVIST?**

**ARE YOU IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH  
A QWOC ACTIVIST?**

**SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF MAINTAINING A  
RELATIONSHIP WHILE ORGANIZING FOR  
LIBERATION.**

My name is Montinique McEachern and I am a Black lesbian and Family Therapist. I am working on my doctoral degree at Syracuse University. This research study aims to explore the experiences of queer and trans women of color in romantic relationships while also being politically active. You and your partner can participate in this research study by sharing your experiences in an hour-long interview that will take place in a location that is convenient for you. I will ask you questions about maintaining your relationship while participating in political activism. My hope is for the information gathered in these interviews to help other QWOC form and maintain relationship with a deeper understanding of love and resistance and to help Family therapists better support QWOC.

**1 hour interview  
with you and your  
partner**

**Interviews will  
take place in a  
location that is  
convenient for you  
and your partner,  
or over the phone if  
meeting in person  
is not possible**

**Tell me about what  
activism has meant  
to your  
relationship, &  
what your  
relationship means  
for your activism**

**INTERESTED IN  
PARTICIPATING?  
CONTACT MONTINIQUE  
MCEACHERN**

@MelanatedMoney  
mdmceach@syr.edu  
QueerWOC.com

315-748-5389

Appendix D  
Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me about how you came to form your current relationship?
2. What is your definition of political activism?
3. How did you come to be involved in political movements?
4. What relationship experiences have you had as a couple that influence your political activism?
5. How has being involved in political movements shaped your experience as a couple?
6. Has your relationship been threatened by being involved in political activism? If so, how did you persevere as a couple?
7. Sometimes people involved in political activism feels threats to their survival. Often queer women of color experience threats to their survival. Sometimes being in a relationship can help buffer those threats. Have you experienced this?
8. What contributes to your ability to maintain your relationship while engaged in political activism?

9. Have you been in couple's therapy before? If so, what was helpful or not helpful about your experience?
10. What are the most important things therapists need to know about helping QWOC couples who are engaged in political activism maintain their relationships?

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### EDUCATION

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**Syracuse University** | Syracuse, New York | Doctor of Philosophy | Marriage and Family Therapy  
In progress; Defense : March 6, 2020

**Syracuse University** | Syracuse, New York | Certificate of Advanced Study | Women's and Gender Studies  
May 2017

**Auburn University** | Auburn, Alabama | Masters of Education | Clinical Mental Health Counseling  
August 2013

**Auburn University** | Auburn, Alabama | Bachelor of Arts, Psychology (University Honors Scholar)  
August 2011

### PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATION

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**McEachern, M.D;** Coolhart, D.A; Watson, D (*In press*). Therapy with Queer Women Couples: Multiracial Feminist Therapy Considerations. Handbook of LGBT Couples Therapy

**McEachern, M.D.** (2017). Respect My Ratchet: The Liberatory Consciousness of Ratchetness. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 6(3), 78-89.

### INVITED GUEST SPEAKER

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**McEachern, M. D.** (2019, November 12). *Black Feminism and Narrative Therapy*. Hamilton, NY: Colgate University

**McEachern, M. D. ;** Slade, N. A. (2019, July 10). *Podcasting as Black Feminist Media Work*. West Chester, PN: West Chester University

**McEachern, M. D. ;** Slade, N. A. (2019, January 29). *Podcasting as Black Feminist Media Work*. Hamilton, NY: Colgate University



**McEachern, M. D.** ; Slade, N. A. (2018, March 12). *QueerWOC the Podcast*. Austin, TX South by Southwest Conference

**McEachern, M. D.** ; Slade, N. A. (2018, February 26). *Podcasting for Social Justice #QueerWOC and Unsettled Podcast*. Clinton, NY: Hamilton College

**McEachern, M. D.** (2016, December 3). *Magic and Healing Workshop for Queer People of Color*. New London, CT: Connecticut College

**McEachern, M. D.** (2016, December 2). *Self Care and Healing Workshop*. New London, CT: Connecticut College

**McEachern, M. D.** (2016, April 13). *SexualiTEA: Out and Greek*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University

## ***TEACHING EXPERIENCE***

---

8/2019 – Present      **Graduate Instructor**  
Syracuse University (Gwen Pough [gdpough@syr.edu](mailto:gdpough@syr.edu))  
Syracuse, New York

Graduate Assistant for WGS 101 Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies, an introductory course that provides an overview of debates on and approaches to studying women, gender, sexuality, and feminism in national and transnational contexts.

Planned and implemented curriculum with a focus on social justice.

Prepared lectures, led lectures, graded assignments, and facilitated class discussions

1/2019 – 5/2019      **Lecturer**  
Syracuse University (Gwen Pough [gdpough@syr.edu](mailto:gdpough@syr.edu))  
Syracuse, New York

Graduate Assistant for WGS 473 Women, Rap, and Hip Hop Feminism, a course linking feminism, rap music, and hip-hop culture, exploring the work of women in hip-hop, images of women, and feminist critiques of rap music and hip-hop culture.

Planned and implemented curriculum with a focus on Women's contributions to Hip Hop and social justice through Hip Hop.

Prepared lectures, led lectures, graded assignments, and facilitated class discussions

8/2018 – 12/2018      **Graduate Instructor**  
Syracuse University (Gwen Pough [gdpough@syr.edu](mailto:gdpough@syr.edu))  
Syracuse, New York

Graduate Assistant for WGS 101 Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies, an introductory course that provides an overview of debates on and approaches to studying women, gender, sexuality, and feminism in national and transnational contexts.

Planned and implemented curriculum with a focus on social justice.

Prepared lectures, led lectures, graded assignments, and facilitated class discussions

1/2017 – 5/2017      **Lecturer**  
Syracuse University (Linda Stone Fish [flstone@syr.edu](mailto:flstone@syr.edu))  
Syracuse, New York

Primary instructor for MFT 684 Family Therapy Perspectives on Cultural Diversity, a master's level course developed to explore how six basic dimensions of diversity (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion) interface with the dynamics of oppression to structure reality in general, and more specifically the process of therapy.

Planned and implemented curriculum with a focus on social justice.

Prepared lectures, led lectures, and facilitated class discussions

1/2017 – 1/2017      **Winterlude Graduate Instructor**  
Syracuse University (Deb Coolhart)  
Syracuse, New York

Prepared lectures and taught sections of MFT 642 Therapy with LGBT Couples and Families, a master's level course developed to introduce students to LGBTQ relationship issues and sexual, gender identity development and clinical systems work with LGBTQ clients.

1/2016 – 1/2016      **Graduate Instructor**  
Syracuse University (Deb Coolhart)  
Syracuse, New York

Facilitated class discussions and led lectures for MFT 642 Therapy with LGBT Couples and Families, a master's level course developed to introduce students to LGBTQ relationship issues and sexual, gender identity development and clinical systems work with LGBTQ clients.

8/2014 – 12/2014      **Graduate Instructor**  
Syracuse University  
Syracuse, New York

Planned lectures and implemented curriculum for COU 910 Orientation to the Counseling Profession, a graduate level course developed to introduce students to fundamental components of the counseling profession for application in a variety of professional counseling settings.

1/2014 – 5/2014      **Graduate Instructor** Syracuse  
University  
Syracuse, New York

Led lectures and class discussions for COU 585 General Counseling Methods, an undergraduate level course developed to orient students to fundamental components of the theory and practice of counseling for application in a variety of professional settings.

Provided constructive feedback and guidance on student assignments in a timely fashion.

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### ***AWARDS / SCHOLARSHIPS***

<b>National Women's Studies Association Conference Scholarship</b>	11/2019
National Women's Studies Association	
<b>Diane Lyden Murphy Bread and Roses Award for Activism on Behalf of Women</b>	5/2016
Syracuse University Women and Gender Studies Department	
<b>The Martin Luther King, Jr. Unsung Hero Award</b>	1/2016
Syracuse University	
<b>The Community-Building Recognition Award</b>	4/2015
Syracuse University LGBT Resource Center	
<b>National LGBTQ Task Force Eric Rofes Scholarship</b>	12/2014
Creating Change Recipient	

## ***SCHOLARSHIP***

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### ***National Scholarly Presentations***

Carey, T., Durham, A., Jones, S., **McEachern, M. D.**, Pough, G. (2019, November 16) We Run This: Missy :Misdemeanor" Elliot as the Embodiment of Third Wave Black Feminism. A workshop presented at the National Women's Studies Association annual conference in San Francisco, CA

Jaffee, L. J., Kannan, A. V., Mathews, T., **McEachern, M. D.**, Moghaddam, F., Singh, T. (2019, November 15) Generating Transnational Feminist Futures: Relying on Co-Mentorship to Survive Graduate School. A workshop presented at the National Women's Studies Association annual conference in San Francisco, CA

**McEachern, M. D.**, (2019, May 30) Healing as Resistance: A QTPOC Healing Space. A healing workshop presented at The National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education in Portland, OR

Kannan, A. V., Rodriguez, Y., Jaffee, L. J., **McEachern, M. D.** (2018, November 11) Co-Creating and Organizing with Kids: Building Intergenerational Black and Brown Solidarity. A presentation at the National Women's Studies Association annual conference in Atlanta, GA

**McEachern, M. D.**, (2018, June 21) Black Feminist Narrative Family Therapy. A poster presentation presented at American Family Therapy Academy annual conference in Austin, TX.

**McEachern, M. D.**, (2018, June 23) Love on the Front Lines: QWOC Activist Couples. A brief presentation presented at American Family Therapy Academy annual conference in Austin, TX.

**McEachern, M. D.;** Slade, N. T.; Mohammad, N.; Frances, J., (2018, March 12) QueerWOC. A live presentation on podcasting as a tool for wellness for queer women of color at SXSW Media Conference on the social impact track.

**McEachern, M.D.,** Gray, T. (2016, May). Are the Girls Alright? Unrallying and Radical Healing for Queer and Trans Women of Color in Higher Education. A workshop presented at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education in San Francisco, CA.

**McEachern, M.D.,** Riley, M. (2015, May). Fusion? Yaaas!: Intragroup Discussion Groups and its impact on Queer Students of Color at a Historically White Institution. A workshop presented at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education in Washington, DC.

**McEachern, M.D.** (2014, October 11). QueerWOC: Systemic and Ecological Implications of Social Media for Queer Women of Color. A workshop presentation presented at the Legacies of Black Feminism Conference, Princeton University, NJ.

**McEachern, M.D.** (2014, September 20). One less Lipstick Lesbian: Exploring the Self-Identification and Experiences of Masculine-of-Center Black Lesbians. A workshop presentation presented at the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling National Conference, New Orleans, LA.

**McEachern, M.D.,** Luke, M., (2014, September 19). Queering the Literature on LGBT Youth: A Positive Narrative. A roundtable presented at the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling National Conference, New Orleans, LA.

### ***Regional Scholarly Presentations***

**McEachern, M.D.,** Lopez, M., (2014, September 27). Igniting the Power to Love: An Ecological Review of Sexuality in Individuals with Developmental Disabilities. A poster presented at the North Atlantic Region of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision.

### ***State Scholarly Presentations***

**McEachern, M.D.,** (2013, February 8). More Than Words: Advocating for LGBTQIQ Youth. A poster presentation accepted and presented at the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling of Alabama Fall Conference, Birmingham, AL.

**McEachern, M.D.,** Thompson, E., (2012, November). Sexual Addictions among LGB Populations. A poster presentation accepted and scheduled for presentation at the Alabama Counseling Association Annual Conference, Montgomery, AL.

### ***PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT HISTORY***

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- 9/2017 – Present      **Family Therapist**  
 Connect Marriage and Family Therapy Center, PLLC | East Syracuse, NY  
 Provided systemic individual, couple, and family therapeutic services to clients with relational disturbances. Conducted biopsychosocial intakes for clients. Provided Trans readiness process services for trans clients seeking support in their medical transitions and relationships.
- 8/2015 – 6/2017      **Trans Team Therapist, Couple and Family Therapy**  
 Couple and Family Therapy Center | Syracuse University, NY  
 Provided systemic individual, couple, and family therapeutic services to clients with relational disturbances. Conducted biopsychosocial intakes for clients. Conducted WPATH compliant Transgender assessments. Provided Trans readiness process services for trans clients seeking support in their medical transitions and relationships.
- 3/2015 – 9/2015      **CD Therapist, Chemical Dependency Counseling**  
 Crouse Hospital Chemical Dependency Treatment Services | Syracuse, NY  
 Provided group and individual therapeutic services to female clients with chemical dependency or substance use disorders.
- 8/2013 – 8/2017      **Graduate Research Assistant**  
 Syracuse University  
 Syracuse, NY  
 Analyzed qualitative research data aimed at exploring experiences of support for LGBTQ individuals through transcribing group and individual interviews. Coded data sets using grounded theory techniques, and conducted literature reviews to synthesize topics related to family therapy, clinical supervision, and international counseling experiences.
- 5/2011 – 8/2011      **Research Assistant**  
 Larsen & Toubro,  
 Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Developed and administered surveys of thermal comfort as it related to productivity in the workplace in Chennai, India.

### ***PROFESSIONAL SERVICE & MEMBERSHIPS***

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|---|-----------------|
| Lesbian Caucus Co-Chair (NWSA)              | 11/2019-Present |
| National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) | 1/2018-Present  |

American Family Therapy Association (AFTA)	8/2015-Present
Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC)	2/2014-Present
Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals	11/2014-2016